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REKI KAWAHARA ABEC BEE-PEE

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MOON CRADLE





"Ummm..."

— Kirito

§ The boy who brought peace to the Underworld. Presently, he serves as the swordsman delegate on Centoria's Human Unification Council.

"Just call me Enki and call Negio Negio, and it'll really shrink the distance between us..."

— Entokia
Synthesis
Eighteen

§ A senior Integrity Knight. He focused on defending the cathedral and the End Mountains with Nergius in the great war.

"...Don't drag me into it!"

— Nergius
Synthesis
Sixteen

§ A senior Integrity Knight. Often works with Entokia. He wields the Budding Storm Spear.



"It should be just about ready now."

Hana

§ Former personal chef to Administrator. She now cooks for anyone in Central Cathedral, regardless of rank.

"...!!"

Ronie Arabel

§ Formerly Kirito's page at the academy. In recognition of her deeds during the war, she is now an apprentice Integrity Knight at Central Cathedral.

"This is incredibly good!"

Tiese Schtrinen

§ Formerly Eugeo's page at the academy. Like Ronie, she is now an apprentice Integrity Knight in recognition of her deeds in battle.

"Let's divide it into servings while it's still hot."

Asuna

§ A rapier-wielding girl who survived the great war at Kirito's side. Serves as the swordswoman subdelegate on Centoria's Human Unification Council.



“...N-no way...”

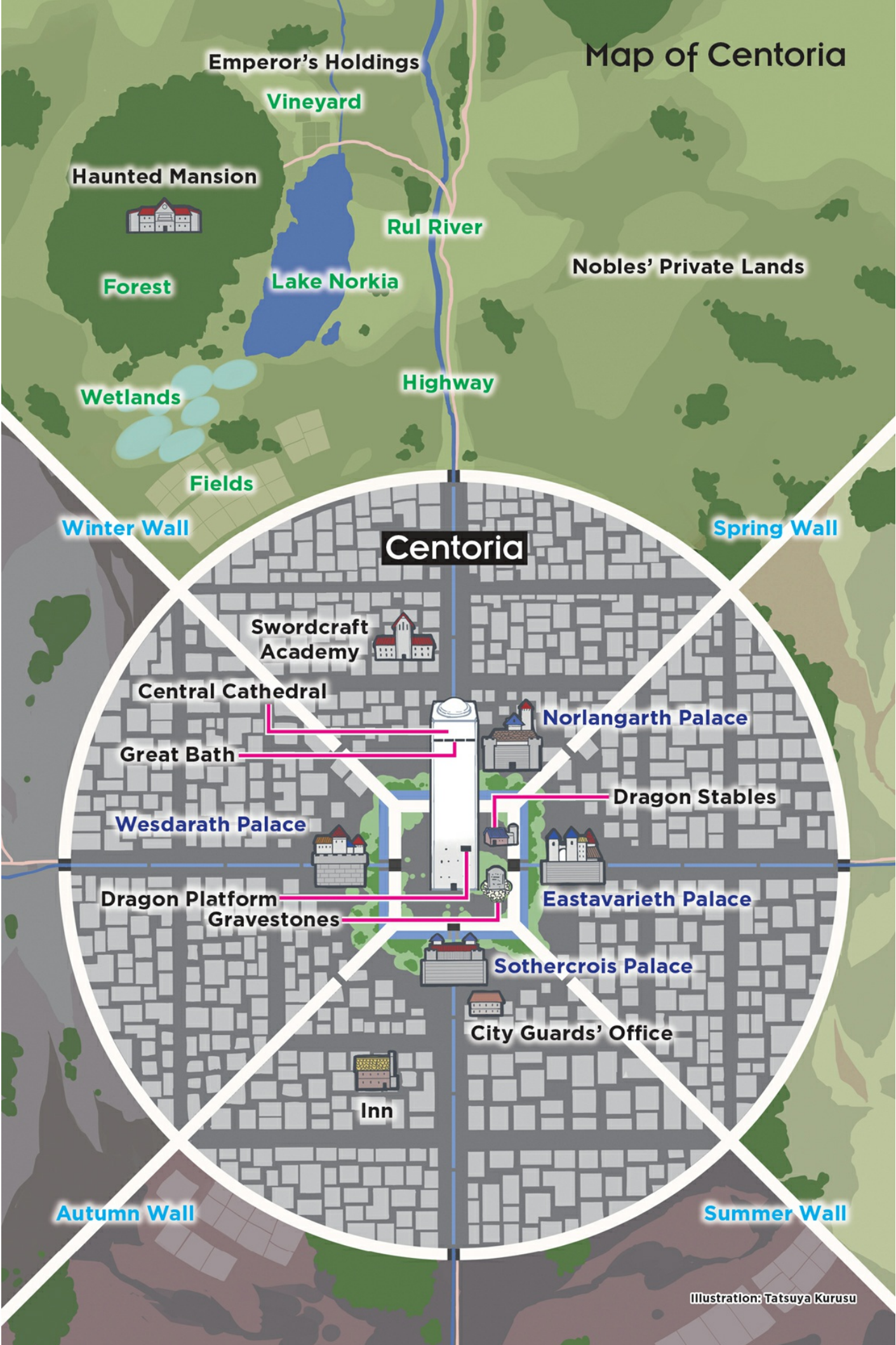
“This...can’t be possible.”

“Unexpected guests, then. Or...perhaps I should call it the guidance of Vecta.”

Man in the Black Robe

§ The one likely responsible for Yazen’s murder and Leazetta’s attempted kidnapping. But who is he...?

Map of Centoria



**SWORD
ART
ONLINE
MOON CRADLE**

VOLUME 20

Reki Kawahara

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NEW YORK

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SWORD ART ONLINE, Volume 20: MOON CRADLE

REKI KAWAHARA

Translation by Stephen Paul

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**"THIS MIGHT BE A GAME,
BUT IT'S NOT SOMETHING
YOU PLAY."**

—Akihiko Kayaba, *Sword Art Online* programmer



Reki Kawahara

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A pure-white lily and a hawk with its wings outstretched, emblazoned on a field of black:

The crest of the Norlangarth Empire, hanging on a wall banner, was wreathed in red flames.

Fire licked here and there at the thick rug covering the throne room floor. The sounds of metal clashing and voices shouting flowed ceaselessly from the distance, throughout both the Imperial Palace and North Centoria itself.

About twenty paces in front of Ronie and Tiese, who waited with swords drawn, was a man who sat leisurely in the shockingly tall throne of gold-and-black leather. He had his legs crossed and a fist propping up his cheek, as though he didn't have a single care about the flames spreading throughout the chamber.

"...I thought Integrity Knights would be the first to reach me," intoned the man imperiously, stroking his pointed gray beard. "Instead, it is not knights, not even soldiers, but two little girls...Are you students at Swordcraft Academy, then?"

They had no obligation to answer, yet Ronie felt an invisible pressure that seemed intent on making her lower her head into a bow. She shook it off with effort and said, "Primary Trainee Ronie Arabel of North Centoria Imperial Swordcraft Academy!"

Tiese followed her, shouting to hide her desperation. "Likewise, Tiese Schtrinen!"

"Ahhh, that great lump of a man has finally been exposed for the fraud that he is, if he's lost a battle to children so little they've only just learned how to hold a steel sword." The man sneered and glanced to his right.

Collapsed atop the carpet, limbs splayed outward, lay a very tall man clad in black plate armor with silvery-white details. The inlay on his breastplate was the crest of the North Centoria Imperial Guard. He wasn't dead, but he'd taken Tiese's and Ronie's consecutive techniques simultaneously—he wouldn't be getting up anytime soon.

They'd fought that man, the captain of the emperor's personal guard, in a

furious battle that spanned over twenty minutes. If there had been only one of them, she wouldn't have won, and even together, they would not have won a traditional sword duel without the use of sacred arts. The flames licking at various surfaces of the royal chamber were from the heat elements that Ronie had thrown at him in desperation.

He'd been a formidable foe, but the captain had fought honorably. So to hear this man speak ill of the loyal servant who'd risked his life to protect him made Ronie furious.

She hadn't suffered any deep wounds, but the captain's vicious strikes left her arms with a numbing ache, and the countless little cuts and bruises throbbed incessantly. But by focusing her attention, she was able to momentarily forget all the pain and fear.

"This war is over! Surrender now and retract your orders to the Imperial Guard!"

To her left, Tiese called out in a crisp, clear voice, "The Integrity Knights and the Human Guardian Army will be here shortly! There is nowhere to escape!"

In truth, this warning should have been given by the commanding officer of the operation to conquer the Imperial Palace of North Centoria, Deusolbert Synthesis Seven. And he had been leading the unit containing Ronie and Tiese, right up to the corridor leading toward the throne room.

But when Deusolbert received word that the force attacking the castle's west gate was being pushed back, he had ordered the unit to keep going and left to back up the other group. Then the soldiers in the unit drew the attention of the Imperial Knights stationed in the corridor and told the *girls* to keep going, so ultimately it was just the two of them in the throne room.

There was a reason the operation was so rushed.

This war, later to be known as the Rebellion of the Four Empires, was brought about when the four emperors who controlled the quadrants of the human realm issued joint edicts declaring the one-month-old Human Unification Council an act of treachery attempting to control the Axiom Church and sent the Imperial Knights under their command to invade Central Cathedral.

These imperial soldiers were not sworn enemies like the red knights who had invaded during the Otherworld War but, instead, fellow residents of Centoria. The casualties had to be kept to an absolute minimum, according to Kirito, the swordsman delegate of the Human Unification Council.

If all the Integrity Knights and arts casters had stayed inside the cathedral to focus on defense, and they'd ordered the Human Guardian Army forces stationed in Centoria to attack from behind, they could have wiped out the Imperial Knights, if they so desired.

But Kirito had chosen not to do this. Instead, he'd evacuated nearly all of the Integrity Knights from the cathedral, pairing them up with the guardian army forces and sending them to attack the four imperial palaces. The only way to minimize the damage would have been to capture the emperors as soon as possible and force them to retract their edicts. So the other soldiers in the unit had taken on the role of decoy, pulling the attention of the Imperial Knights away so Ronie and Tiese could rush into the throne room.

At this very moment, Kirito and his subdelegate, Asuna, were with a handful of lower knights, guards, and artificers defending Central Cathedral. But even the strongest swordsman in the world could not easily defend four gates, each in a cardinal direction and with an imperial army trying to break through it.

So now they had to scrap those edicts as soon as possible and bring the battle of North Centoria to an end.

But despite their fervor, the man on the throne—Emperor Cruiga Norlangarth VI—just stared back at them, his features cold and composed.

“...Little girls from some lower noble houses whose names I wouldn't even know, refusing to bow before me, daring to point their blades instead. Even this single incident speaks to the devastation this Unification Council seeks to unleash upon our order and security, does it not?”

He spoke as though he were being perfectly reasonable and smoothly picked up a crystal goblet from a small tray at the side of his throne. He took a sip of the dark-purple liquid held within.

The emperor's wine was created from the lands richest with Solus's and Terraria's blessings, private holdings of the imperial families and other high

nobles. A single bottle cost more than a month's stipend for a lower noble family, according to what Ronie's father had once told her. All this, even though, if those vineyards were to be turned into wheat fields, they'd supply the demand for all of North Centoria for the year.

No order of things that allowed for such extravagance could be anything *but* corrupt.

"And what have the high nobles done for humanity?!" Ronie shouted, the tip of her sword pointed at the emperor's face. "The people who fought for our side in the Otherworld War...The ones who stood up to protect the citizens—they were ordinary common guards and lower nobles!"

"That's right! All you high nobles stayed safe in your castles and holdings, worried you might lose them!" Tiese added, jabbing a finger at the emperor.

This was an act that would have earned her the wrath of the "judicial authority" system that high nobles wielded against those of lower rank. For the first time, the fine bridge of the emperor's nose wrinkled with displeasure.

"...But of course we did," he said, swirling the wine in his glass. "That is the job of the lower nobles and guards: to give their lives to protect mine. And my job is to properly lead the common people of the empire. Yes...to this point, only the lands of the northern empire were within my grasp, but I cannot have this godforsaken rabble monopolizing the Axiom Church while Her Holiness, the pontifex, is in her long sleep. It is a mistake that must be corrected. If anyone is to unify the human lands, it will not be some nameless swordsman who appeared out of thin air—it will be I, Cruiga Norlangarth!"

The emperor tossed back the rest of his wine in one gulp and threw the glass to the floor. The fine crystal vessel shattered, and the man who ruled the empire got to his feet, reaching for a longsword that rested against the side of the throne.

From the crimson sheath, decorated so finely that Ronie had never seen its like before, he pulled a blade that shone like polished glass.

Instantly, from the top of the three-stepped throne dais, something like a chill wind blew through her. Ronie pulled her right foot back initially but held firm and leaned forward against the force.

Just because they did not appear in battle did not mean the imperial or noble families could not fight.

Of course, upper nobles who dedicated themselves to fierce daily training like Volo Levantein, the former first-seat disciple at the academy, were very rare. But according to Kirito, those nobles' authority levels were increased by the regular hunting they performed in the forests outside the city, a privilege only they could enjoy. Noble children went to Swordcraft Academy almost without exception, so they all had the opportunity to learn a solid floor of swordfighting.

And for an emperor, there were special private tutors who could bestow upon him the finest training from a young age—and many opportunities to hunt larger game. The jeweled blade the emperor held was clearly of a higher item priority than the standard-issue swords Ronie and Tiese used, too.

The sound of soldiers and Imperial Knights clashing floated forth ceaselessly from the corridor behind them. The banners dyed with the imperial crest on the walls to either side continued to burn and crumble. The emperor's sword flashed bright red, reflecting the color of the flames.

Ronie was the heir to a noble house, however lowly. Even with a sword in her hands, the fear and obedience toward the imperial family she'd grown up with did not vanish. But now she knew that there were things more important than blind obedience.

When Kirito and Eugeo were just students at the academy, like Ronie and Tiese, they fought against Administrator, the half-divine being who ruled the entire human world. And now that Kirito was fighting to protect Central Cathedral, fighting to bring forth a new and better age, she could not fail him and retreat. Not at this moment. Not ever.

"If you will not withdraw the edict...then I will cut you down here!" Ronie shouted, raising her standard-issue sword aloft.

At her side, Tiese also assumed the Aincrad-style stance at medium height.

Emperor Cruiga was no longer smiling. He raised the jeweled sword as though splitting the heavens, taking the bold stance of the High-Norkia style.

When the flames began to lick at the largest of the wall hangings, located

behind the throne, Ronie shot forward.

Instantly, the floor beneath her lost its form, becoming a yawning hole of blackness.

Before she could so much as scream, Ronie plummeted into the hole, down and down, until...



“Hngf!”

The breath burst from her throat when her back struck the ground.

Ronie yanked aside the cloth that clung to her face and struggled in the darkness for a few moments before recognizing that she was in her own bedroom. She’d fallen out of the bed in her sleep.

There was only darkness outside the window. Ronie collected her blankets and climbed back into bed.

It was late February now, and although the sunlight was getting warmer, the predawn morning was still freezing cold. *If only Central Cathedral had the same natural water-heating system that Obsidia Palace did over in the Dark Territory*, she wished with a sigh, pulling the blankets tighter around herself.

Ronie wasn’t a particularly fretful sleeper—as far as she knew—but it was clearly the dream about that terrible day that had caused her to struggle enough to fall out of bed. She often forgot the dream as soon as she awoke, but this time, the nightmare was still vivid in her mind.

Her return to Centoria after the Otherworld War was in mid-November of the year 380 HE. The Human Unification Council convened in December, and the Rebellion of the Four Empires happened in February 381 HE, which meant that it was exactly a year ago that Ronie and Tiese had crossed swords with Emperor Cruiga Norlangarth.

Perhaps that was why she’d had the dream—*Why do people dream anyway?* she wondered, waiting for the sleep fairy to pay her a visit—but her eyelids did not grow heavy again. After three minutes of not falling asleep, the five o’clock bells rang quietly outside, so she surrendered and sat up.

Ronie hit the floor feetfirst this time, draping a heavy shawl around her

shoulders and reaching for the lamp on the table. She turned a large screw in the middle of the body, causing the water filling the glass container to flow into a lower compartment. This exposed a mineral rock the size of a large egg inside the lamp, which in turn began to glow with its own natural, soft-yellow light.

When they'd returned from the dark lands two days ago, Kirito had about ten of Obsidia's famous ore lamps packed into his dragoncraft's cargo space, which he gave away to others, including one each to Ronie and Tiese. Not only was it simple to light—simply drain the water to light it up and flip it over to return the water and extinguish it—the ore lamps were also easier to use than traditional oil lamps and even the cathedral's light-element lamps, because there was no element generation required.

Of course, the stones—they called them *luminores*, apparently—didn't burn for an everlasting period. If you left them exposed, they would eventually burn out in about four days. So even if she was very careful about extinguishing the lamp, it might last a month at best. That made her feel guilty about using it like this, but Kirito seemed to be considering a much larger import of the stones from the Dark Territory.

Since they would burn on their own if not submerged in water, some special care was needed to transport them long distances, but once that process was stabilized, Centoria's nights would be much brighter. It might bring some relief to Obsidia, too, which was becoming overcrowded with refugees who couldn't find work there.

Still, the status of one glowing ore wasn't going to turn the fortunes of the dark realm around. Kirito was busy searching for solutions to its fundamental lack of solar and soil resources—and thus, a lack of farming adequate to support its population. But so far, his research hadn't yielded any results.

He was placing his greatest hopes in the land on the other side of the Wall at the End of the World, the obstacle that surrounded the entire Underworld, but this, too, had many challenges associated with it. The infinite, unscalable wall kept all living things from passing through it. So could it even be crossed by a dragoncraft? And if you got there, would you find another vast land before you—or simply nothingness?

“.....Even still...,” Ronie murmured. But she didn’t complete her thought.

Instead, she moved to her bureau and the sword stand atop it. She silently lifted a longsword in a black leather sheath—and also removed a small wooden box from a drawer—before returning to the table.

The sword, which had a black leather handle like the sheath and a platinum hilt carved to look like a crescent moon, was a special sword given to her by Swordswoman Subdelegate Asuna just five days prior. Its priority level was 39—not to the level of a Divine Object, but far too fine for a mere apprentice knight.

The blade glowed dazzlingly in the light of the ore lamp when she unsheathed it, but there was one small scratch on its surface. That was from the moment when she’d slashed the left arm of the man in the black robe, who’d been abducting Leazetta, the daughter of Commander Iskahn and Ambassador Sheyta, on the top floor of the dark lands’ Obsidia Palace.

The sword’s actual life had been restored after two whole days in its protective sheath, but any stains or nicks would have to be buffed out by hand.

She placed the weapon on the table and opened the wooden box. First, she used a cotton cloth to wipe clean the blade, hilt, and handle. Then she drizzled some polishing oil on a piece of silver-backed deer leather from the southern empire and carefully, thoroughly polished the blade.

Back at Swordcraft Academy, Kirito and Eugeo often chatted about this and that as they polished their respective Night-Sky Blade and Blue Rose Sword. Ronie very much enjoyed being present in their company as they did it. The month and a half that she and Tiese served as their pages was the most enjoyable and vivid time in her seventeen years of life.

Of course, now that the Otherworld War and the Rebellion of the Four Empires were over, and peace had returned, life at the cathedral was enjoyable. Though training in swordsmanship, sacred arts, and Incarnation was difficult, she wished she could continue it forever. But those momentary glimpses of a shadow crossing Tiese’s or Kirito’s faces were always a reminder that Eugeo was gone...and his absence left a great emptiness in their lives.

Kirito and Eugeo, Ronie and Tiese. How precious the time had been for the four of them, how irreplaceable. But it was gone forever now, never to return.

And yet...

Perhaps that feeling wasn't just because of Eugeo's absence.

Perhaps it was because, like Tiese's fleeting feelings of romance, Ronie also knew that her sentiments would never be returned, again and again...

"Ah...!"

Her hand suddenly slipped, grazing the flesh of her thumb against the blade's edge. Ronie set down the sword and looked at her finger. There was almost no pain at all, but beads of blood were rising along a very fine cut.

She lifted her left hand to generate light elements, then stopped herself and lowered it. Instead, she popped her thumb into her mouth and licked the wound. It stopped bleeding at once but would take some time before it sealed up. This was her punishment for letting her mind wander as she handled her weapon.

The process of polishing with the oiled leather was done, so lastly, she used a soft cloth to leave it spotless and clear, then returned the sword to the sheath.

It was through acts like this that she would steadily form a connection with her weapon, the newly named Moonbeam Sword. By the time she had completely mastered control over it, all these feelings with no place to go would be sorted out for good.

Ronie stood up, returned the sword and her supplies to the bureau, and tossed her shawl onto the bed. Then she stripped off her pajamas, prompting her to sneeze briefly as the chill hit her skin.

Why do people sneeze? I'll have to ask Kirito whenever I ask him why people dream, she thought, hurrying over to the wardrobe where she kept her knight's uniform.

February 23rd of the 382nd year of the Human Era.

A cold rain that started up before dawn pelted the large glass windows lining the Great Hall of Ghostly Light on the fiftieth floor of Central Cathedral.

An extra walkway with banisters, located high up along the walls, outfitted the great hall, and it was here that Ronie and Tiese stood, watching the council

meeting below.

As for why they were in the great hall and not at the round table, it was because they were taking care of Fanatio's baby, Berche, and he was generally happier when he was higher up. Of course, the fiftieth floor itself was more than two hundred mels above the ground, but a one-year-old toddler couldn't tell when he was isolated by thick walls and sturdy glass.

"Ronie, you saw Sheyta's baby in Obsidia, right?" Tiese whispered as she rocked the sleepy Berche in her arms.

"Yes, and I gave her milk, too."

"Awww, lucky. She's only three months, right? She must be so tiny and cute..."

"Oh, she had the softest, most delicate hair, and large, curious eyes..."

Suddenly, Tiese had a far-off look in her eyes. "Aw...Berche's cute when he's sleeping, but boys and girls are just different. I hope Sheyta brings her along the next time she makes a return visit..."

Ronie was about to reassure Tiese that she would but stopped herself.

She hadn't yet told her friend that Leazetta, said daughter of Sheyta and Iskahn, had been abducted, if only for half a day. Kirito had asked her not to say anything until he could announce the news at today's council meeting. In fact, all the misgivings and worries she felt about that incident had only grown over the last few days, rather than faded.

She could understand why the kidnapper would go after Leazetta. If he wanted to threaten Kirito, there couldn't be a more effective hostage than baby Lea. Perhaps Swordswoman Subdelegate Asuna, but there wasn't a villain capable of kidnapping and imprisoning her in all of the Underworld now.

It was the *means* that were a mystery.

The kidnapper had snuck in near the very top floor of heavily guarded Obsidia Palace, which was still 150 mels tall, if not nearly as tall as the cathedral. After abducting Leazetta, he had opened the window of the supposedly sealed fiftieth floor and snuck into the throne room to hide. Thankfully, Kirito had

discovered him, and though Ronie had gotten a good blow on his left arm as he jumped out the window, a body had never turned up.

When the fiftieth-floor window had opened, Ronie had seen a glowing-red jewel around the kidnapper's neck. When she'd told Commander Iskahn about it, he'd said that there had been a similar stone in the crown Emperor Vecta had worn before his death in the war.

Iskahn still suspected that the kidnapper was involved in the assassins guild, but that organization had already been disbanded, apparently. And the artificial life-forms known as minions that the kidnapper used to sow chaos inside the castle could only be produced by the vastly weakened dark mages guild.

What was happening in the Dark Territory...and in Centoria? Who was doing it—and why...?

“...And that's basically everything that happened at Obsidia Palace,” Ronie heard Kirito say below, bringing her back to her senses.

At nearly the same moment, Tiese exclaimed, “What...? You went through all of that, over there?!”

Apparently, Kirito had been explaining what'd happened in Obsidia at the same time Ronie had been retracing all their steps in her mind. She glanced at her best friend and gave an awkward shrug. “Y-yeah...but I wasn't really in any particular danger.”

“You attacked someone kidnapping a baby; that sounds plenty dangerous to me! Good grief...I suppose pages really do take after their tutors.”

“I don't remember that being a saying at school...,” Ronie argued. Meanwhile, the meeting below proceeded:

“I have no desire to dredge up what has already happened, Swordsman Delegate, but I most certainly warned you about this the other day! For every job in the world, there's at least one person who makes it their calling!” said a deep voice like a bowstring made of steel. It belonged to Integrity Knight Deusolbert Synthesis Seven. He was dressed in a kimono of the eastern style rather than his usual bronze-red armor because of the early hour, but the time clearly had no effect on his strictness.

“There are many guards stationed around Obsidia Palace, I’m sure,” he continued. “You should have left them to deal with the miscreant! You are now the cornerstone of the human realm—of the entire Underworld! I’m certain you must know the consequences for our world if you were to be hurt!”

When Deusolbert was done, the next to speak was the new Integrity Knight commander, Fanatio Synthesis Two, who was usually responsible for calming him down.

“I actually agree with Deusolbert this time. Boy—I mean, Swordsman Delegate—the age is over when you are the one taking up your sword to fight with the enemy. I hope you understand that.”

Renly Synthesis Twenty-Seven and the other agency heads of the cathedral nodded vigorously at this assessment. The north end of the round table was turning into a scolding session rather than a meeting, where the swordsman delegate dressed in black looked somber but tried to state his case in a less than grave manner.

“L-look, I get what you’re all trying to say...but even Commander Bercouli used to wander off by himself to the End Mountains to get into fights with the dark knights, didn’t he? It’s like, you can put your leaders and representatives and such in a safe place where they won’t get hurt, but, you know, how do you build trust that way...?”

I suppose it’s just like Kirito to have a perfectly good reason but still manage to deliver it in a way that sounds like a child’s excuse, thought Ronie from the walkway above.

“You and Commander Bercouli had very different positions!”

The voice filled the great hall with all the bite of a sharpened blade edge.

It belonged to a very thin knight who had not been present at the previous council meeting.

His fanciful, flowing armor was pale green. His dark-green hair, a very rare shade, was so long that it threatened to touch the floor when he sat in a chair, but he was most definitely male. Behind him, a long spear with its head protected by a special leather sheath stood on its own on the floor, perfectly

balanced.

The knight fixed Kirito with a piercing gaze. “Commander Bercouli continued his battle to protect the realm and the Axiom Church on the wishes of the mighty Administrator for years and years! But you are under no one’s orders, Swordsman Delegate...which means that it is your duty that compels you to behave properly!”

Kirito took a step back, intimidated by the knight’s eloquent speech, but he still protested. “B-by that logic, I could just order myself to do whatever I wanted...”

The knight clanked loudly, rising with his hands on the table. But the present commander, Fanatio, smoothly interceded before more seething rebukes could fly.

“Calm yourself, little Negi.”

“I am not a green onion! My name is Nergius!” he shot back, incensed—but sat down obediently all the same. The knight’s name was Nergius Synthesis Sixteen. He was a higher Integrity Knight, one of those who had served the Axiom Church for over a hundred years.

According to the process of giving names in the human world, the name Nergius was a desire for him to be blessed with nobility, boldness, and intelligence. But ever since Ronie heard about the backstory of his divine weapon, the Budding Storm Spear, she’d playfully imagined a different meaning to his name.

In a farming village in a more remote region of Wesdarath, there was a prized vegetable known as the rico onion. It was twice as long and three times as thick as the regular kind of green onion, otherwise known as negi, and four times as sweet—at least, according to the sales pitch. At any rate, one day many years in the past, a farmer noticed that an especially tall rico onion was growing in the corner of one of his fields.

Delighted, the farmer began to take great care of it, hoping to encourage it to grow even larger. The green onion grew and grew, until it was over one mel long, then two mels.

Eventually, tales of the monster onion spread across the countryside, such that visitors came from nearby towns and villages to marvel at it. Feeling greedy, the farmer chose not to harvest the plant but told visitors that praying to it would bring good luck, and he charged them to see it. The plant continued to grow past three mels, then four, and its stalk was over fifty cens thick. The roots where it should have been white took on a silver, metallic sheen, and the green of its stalk grew more vivid by the day.

After several months passed, the farmer noticed that something was wrong with his field. None of the new rico onions he was planting would bud. The failure to grow spread to the fields of other farmers, until the entire village was convinced that the cause of the trouble was that monster onion the farmer was treasuring.

At last, the village elder was forced to make a decision: The farmer had to dispose of his monstrous bounty, which was over seven mels in height at this point. He tried to use cattle to pull it out, but the plant did not budge. Next, he tried to cut it down with his ax, but the blade could not get through it. He had no other choice but to dig it up from the roots, but when he started, the sky grew cloudy, and a ferocious storm swept over the village.

After a full day of fierce wind and rain, all the onion fields had been reduced to sludgy swamps, leaving only the monster standing tall and healthy in their midst.

Nergius's Budding Storm Spear was supposedly what remained when Administrator converted that monster onion into a spear for him. Its priority level was in the range of Divine Objects, but it had very strange physical properties; it would stand straight up when placed alone on the ground or the floor, and it would never fall over, no matter the angle.

Its owner was just as upright and straightforward, and though he was undoubtedly a proud and regal knight who had served the Church for many years, he did not leave a very good impression on Ronie. For one thing, Nergius had been the strongest proponent for charging Kirito with heresy and putting him to death when Kirito had become largely unresponsive, following his defeat of Administrator.

Thanks to the levelheaded argument of Commander Bercouli, the hard-liners decided against an immediate execution, but from what she'd heard, Alice had to take Kirito away from Centoria to protect him. Plus, members of Nergius's faction were the ones who stayed behind during the Otherworld War to protect the cathedral and the End Mountains, so she couldn't help but feel a mental distance from them.

To calm himself down, Nergius grabbed the cup of tea on the table before him and downed it in one go. In the moment of released tension that followed, a new—but extremely languid—voice filled the silence.

“Well, I suppose what I would say is: Since Master Kirito takes it upon himself to do anything and everything, we feel sad that there's not a lot of trust in us. Isn't that right, Negio?”

Still holding the empty cup, Nergius glared at the seat to his right. “I never said I felt sad!” he growled, although he did not comment on the strange nickname. It seemed less that he accepted it and more that he was resigned to it at this point.

The other speaker was a young knight who was the same age—visually speaking, at least—as Nergius. He was a bit taller and sturdier than Nergius, with his hair cut to just two or three cens in length, and wore purplish-blue armor. He used a traditional longsword, which was hanging from his left side, rather than standing unassisted on the floor.

His name was Entokia Synthesis Eighteen. He, too, was an elder Integrity Knight and had not taken part in the direct fighting during the war. Like Nergius, he'd been absent for the last several months with business in the southern empire. Apparently, they were investigating whether it would be possible to reopen the tunnel through the End Mountains that had been filled in ages ago.

After Renly, Kirito looked like the youngest person at the meeting. He brushed aside his black hair nervously and said, “Ah, well...I get what you're saying, Nergius and Entokia, but I'm just not the type of person who sits in a tower and gives orders. And it's not like I'm doing *everything* by myself. I had you two performing a very difficult and crucial mission in the south...”

“There! That's the problem!” Entokia suddenly shouted, causing Kirito to

flinch and lean away.

“Wh-what is?”

“You don’t have to be so formal with us like that. Just call me Enki and call Negio Negio, and it’ll really shrink the distance between us...”

“Stop that!” Nergius snapped with great alarm. “He can call you whatever you want, but don’t drag me into it!”

Next to Ronie, Tiese giggled, though she felt guilty about it. But even the Integrity Knights couldn’t hear the sound of whispers from the distant walkway.

“They’re not bad people...I think,” she murmured.

Ronie nodded slightly. “Lady Fanatio said that the reason they can believe so firmly in Kirito is because they fought against him once before. I think Deusolbert...and even Alice feel the same way. Sir Nergius and Sir Entokia weren’t at the cathedral when Kirito and Eugeo invaded, because they were busy guarding the mountains.”

“Oh, right...By the way, why does Sir Entokia call him Master Kirito?”

“I don’t know...”

While they pondered that mystery, Deusolbert clapped his hands forcefully to get the discussion back on topic. “You two can focus on deepening your friendship with the swordsman delegate all you like after the meeting is over. We have more urgent matters to discuss at present.”

Nergius straightened up, indicating he was listening, and Entokia raised his hands in a sign of understanding.

“Now...from what the delegate tells us, it’s clear there is some force that seeks to make the human realm and dark realm go to war again. If that robed man’s plot had come to fruition, and the swordsman delegate was publicly executed in Obsidia, our movement toward greater commerce would have been called off...and we could certainly have plunged back into hostilities.”

The youngest of the knights, Renly Synthesis Twenty-Seven, nodded vigorously. “Since reforming the system of nobility and releasing all private lands, Kirito’s been extremely popular in the capital...It was enough that he was

the hero who stopped Emperor Vecta, but now he's proven himself capable of popular political measures as well."

Ronie was not surprised to see Kirito react to this praise by shrugging uncomfortably. "Actually, it was the agency heads of the Axiom Church who did the real work of reforming the class system, and we had help from Sorti...er, from General Serlut and Instructor Levantein and other high nobles. I'm sure the holdings would have been released eventually, even if I hadn't said anything. Plus..."

He paused, trailing off, then resumed at a quieter volume, "The people of the city...of the entire realm...don't know that I killed the pontifex and the prime senator. The support for the Human Unification Council is synonymous with their belief and trust in the Axiom Church. They still think Administrator is in a long hibernation on the top floor of the cathedral. If they find out that's a lie and that I killed her, whatever popularity I have will vanish in a blink."

That caused Nergius's expression to harden again. After Administrator had died, apparently Commander Bercouli gathered all the remaining knights in Central Cathedral here at the Great Hall of Ghostly Light and revealed the secrets of the Axiom Church that Alice had told him.

Including that the pontifex, in preparation for a coming war with the Dark Territory, was creating monstrous creatures with swords arranged like skeletons. And that to build those monsters, she would use the majority of the population, converting them into swords for her own purposes.

On top of that, the body who presided over the Integrity Knights, the senate, was in fact comprised of just one member: Prime Senator Chudelkin. When the Integrity Knights vanished without warning, it was because Chudelkin's Deep Freeze art forced them into a long, long sleep...

The hard-liners like Nergius reluctantly withdrew their idea for Kirito's execution only after they'd seen for themselves seven Integrity Knights whom the senate had put on ice. Even to this day, they still hadn't finished analyzing the command for Deep Freeze, and so the knights kept sleeping, high up somewhere in the cathedral building.

And there was one last thing: The death of the newest and final Integrity

Knight, Eldrie Synthesis Thirty-One, who had viewed Kirito as a traitor before he perished in the battle to defend the Eastern Gate, had a powerful effect on the attitude of the hard-liners, according to what Deusolbert told them between training sessions.

Ronie and Tiese had passed by Eldrie at the staging area for the Eastern Gate a number of times but never actually traded words with him. They vividly remembered the handsome knight with the lilac-colored curls, striding around smoothly but with a face etched with some hidden mourning.

Commander Bercouli revealed most of the pontifex's secrets to the knights, but there was one thing he didn't say—or perhaps that he couldn't say.

That was the greatest secret of the Integrity Knights: the Synthesis Ritual.

The Integrity Knights, with their mind-boggling strength, were supposedly denizens of the celestial world who were summoned into the mortal realm by Administrator's prayers and returned there when they lost their lives in the line of duty. But only the knights themselves actually believed this story.

In fact, it was duelists with enough skill to win the Four-Empire Unification Tournament or those with enough willpower to violate the Taboo Index who were captured and taken to the cathedral, where their memories would be blocked and replaced by false memories of the celestial realm, thus making them Integrity Knights.

The reason this fragile artifice worked for hundreds of years was because, as a general rule, the Integrity Knights did not interact with the common people whatsoever. They only spoke to regular people when lawbreaking occurred. And such incidents happened only once in decades.

So the families of the Integrity Knights believed that their sons and daughters had achieved the highest honor possible, while tragically, the knights themselves had lost all memories of those families.

That situation was changing, however. Since the Otherworld War and the Rebellion of the Four Empires, a small number of knights had begun offering training to the soldiers of the Human Guardian Army, and once they got comfortable with chatting about themselves, the topic of the knights' identities would arise. The time would soon come when a very difficult conversation

needed to happen, where Kirito would inform the knights that they had all been human born—and that there was no celestial realm at all, or so he claimed.

Even now, Kirito was faced with problems beyond one person's means.

If only I wasn't an apprentice but a full-fledged knight with the right to sit at the table. I wouldn't let even the elder knights over a hundred years older than me speak such nonsense, Ronie imagined as she listened to them argue.

Kirito's dangerous comment about how he'd killed the pontifex left Fanatio and Deusolbert without a response. It was Nergius who broke the heavy silence that followed, but after his earlier outbursts, he was surprisingly calm.

"...I have no interest in rehashing the debate of your past actions, Swordsman Delegate. If this is what will create a lasting peace with the dark lands, then I think it is for the good of all."

Adding on to his partner's comment, Entokia said, "I don't take issue with that part. And nowhere in the Taboo Index does it say you're not allowed to fight with the pontifex."

That brought about annoyed sighs from the two oldest knights.

There might not be a specific entry in the Taboo Index that said that, but Book One, Chapter One, Verse One states "Thou shalt not rebel against the Axiom Church," clear as day. Escaping from prison, racing up the cathedral while defeating knight after knight, then attacking the prime senator and pontifex was clearly a massive act of rebellion against the Church, Ronie knew. Even now that she was an apprentice knight and free from the obligation to obey the Taboo Index and the Basic Imperial Law, she did not think she could ever do something like that.

On the other hand, Kirito and Eugeo had the help of the *other* pontifex, the one who existed on the same level as Administrator, Cardinal. It was Cardinal who healed Fanatio when she was on the verge of death after fighting Kirito—and Cardinal who supposedly perished in the battle against Administrator.

That led to an issue of legal interpretation: What exactly was the Axiom Church as defined by the Taboo Index, then? In the past, any doubts about the text of the Taboo Index could be solved by simply deferring to the pontifex or

the prime senator, but they were now gone. And the Integrity Knights hadn't been given any special privilege to perform their own individual interpretations of the Taboo Index.

In other words, as Kirito himself said, the title of swordsman delegate of the Unification Council did not carry its own unshakable weight, either within the human realm or within the Axiom Church itself.

"I suppose we'll have to leave the investigation of the robed man up to Sheyta and Commander Iskahn," finished Fanatio, making a steeple with her fingers atop the table. "Whether he is from the assassins guild or the dark mages guild over there, we cannot have any effect on the matter. That is, we cannot send spies into Obsidia."

"I agree that it would be a bad idea, and I'd be afraid of the enemy catching them and using them against us. If I was going to send anyone..."

The rest of the table could unanimously sense that the remainder of his statement was going to be *I'd just go myself*, so it was no surprise that he stopped himself and shook his head.

"...No, never mind. Anyway, we'll just have to wait for a report from the Dark Territory about the murder of Yazen...And I suppose that means we won't be able to release Oroi the mountain goblin from captivity here for a while, either," Kirito muttered pensively.

For the very first time at the meeting, his partner, the subdelegate Asuna, opened her mouth to speak. Knowing her, she'd been silent until now to keep herself from snapping at Nergius.

"We're doing everything we can for Oroi and showing him the notable sights of the cathedral every day, so he's not complaining about his house arrest. But he's a little homesick...er, I mean..."

She glanced at Kirito for help, but whatever the sacred-tongue term she'd tried to use was, he didn't know a proper translation into the common tongue, either.

"Um...what do you call it here when you're traveling and you feel down because you're thinking about your home and family?" Asuna asked. The

knights and agency heads looked stumped.

“Well...I understand the feeling you describe, but we have no families, and the cathedral is our home...so if you wanted a single term...” Deusolbert hummed. Ronie and Tiese shared a look. It wasn’t during travel, but there were times they felt that way at the dorms of the academy, and they knew what to call it. Tiese jabbed an elbow into her side, so Ronie leaned over the railing of the walkway.

“Um, I think you’d call it nostalgic melancholy!”

Everyone in the meeting looked up at Ronie and nodded in recognition. She pulled away hastily and saw that little Berche was now wriggling in Tiese’s arms, probably from the sound of shouting. But Tiese rocked him even more vigorously, and the baby smacked his lips and went back to sleep.

“Nostalgic melancholy? That’s very interesting, Ronie. Thank you,” Asuna said, waving up at the girl. She continued, “Well, I feel as though Oroi is suffering some of that melancholy now, so in two or three days, I expect he’ll be asking to go home. I’m hoping we can solve this case before then...”

“Three days is asking a lot, I think. Even a horse messenger from Obsidia is going to take two weeks for a one-way trip,” Fanatio pointed out.

“And you’ll be adding however many days it takes for them to finish their investigation,” Kirito added. “I think we ought to look into whatever we can here, rather than waiting for Sheyta to get back to us.”

“But the dagger used to kill Yazen has vanished, hasn’t it? There were no witnesses and no reason for the victim to have been killed. There are no leads to follow,” Entokia interjected, a grave comment, although his tone of voice was light. The group fell silent.

After a little while, another figure who’d been holding her silence like Asuna hesitantly raised a hand. She wore a spotless white robe and had brown hair tied into one big braid. Her name was Ayuha Furia, a very talented young woman who’d been chosen to lead the Axiom Church’s sacred artificers brigade.

The sacred artificers brigade had previously been known as the priesthood: the body that ran all the local churches throughout the Human Empire. There

was a church in every town and village in the realm, manned by users of sacred arts known by the sacred terms *brother* and *sister*. In some places, these people had even more influence than village elders or mayors. Managing these people meant naturally possessing a great amount of hidden influence.

And the four bishops who controlled the priesthood wielded more power than even the high nobles, in a sense. But when Commander Bercouli requested their help and attendance in the battle to defend the Eastern Gate, all four of them refused. Of the roughly three hundred members who joined the Human Guardian Army during the war, the majority were lower or intermediate members, and only a hundred or so masters of attack arts took part. Virtually all the high priests and above stayed put inside the cathedral.

After the war was over, and the Unification Council was founded, it was revealed that all four bishops were stockpiling riches in their private quarters, and they were exiled from Central Cathedral. The priesthood itself was reformed into the sacred artificers brigade, and the fifth-ranked noble Ayuha Furia was chosen to be its first leader.

Ayuha not only attended the battle at the gate, but she also took part in the decoy force, fighting fiercely to the end of the war and displaying great leadership over the priests in battle. Ronie had been in the same unit and vividly recalled the sight of her rushing around to perform healing arts, her white robe stained red with the blood of the wounded. Her sacred arts power was not on the level of the senior Integrity Knights, but her knowledge of the arts and reagents was vast. And above all else, she was earnest and kind.

If Ronie was going to learn sacred arts, she'd want to take lessons from Ayuha. Sadly, the two girls' teacher was Ayuha's younger sister, Soness Furia, a librarian at the newly arranged Great Library, and she was very strict. You could tell how bad it was because Swordswoman Subdelegate Asuna took lessons, too, and though she was as unshakable as a great tree, even she complained about Soness from time to time.

Soness had the right to attend the meetings, too, but unless it was an emergency of some kind, she almost never left her library. She claimed that if she didn't decipher the arts placed upon the library by the previous librarian, there was no saying what might happen, but Ronie didn't understand what that

meant.

Fanatio nodded at Ayuha to acknowledge her. The young woman took a breath and spoke slowly and calmly. “As for that matter, the sacred artificers brigade may be able to offer some assistance.”

“Oh...? What do you mean?”

“We’ve been making progress in deciphering the command used to bind the automated senate that was designed to detect violators of the Taboo Index... and it seems that those pitiable senators could not only instantly detect violators of the Taboo Index, but they could even look into the past, to a certain degree, in order to observe them.”

“Into the past...?” Fanatio murmured. The other knights and agency heads looked equally befuddled.

But Kirito leaned forward so vigorously his chair rattled. “W-wait a second,” he stammered. “Does that mean they can see the server log...er, I mean, can they see past events in a viewable form? It can’t be...but I guess it’s possible...If the system detected a violation of the Taboo Index, by the time you opened a window, the violation itself would have already happened. Unless you could look into the past, you wouldn’t be able to confirm what actually took place. How many days in the past can that art cover?”

“At present, it is difficult to span anything measured in days, Swordsman Delegate. I attempted the art myself, but the strain was so great that thirty minutes was the furthest I could go. If I could have used this past-scrying right after the incident occurred, that would have been best, but we only discovered the documents yesterday,” Ayuha admitted with frustration. Kirito frowned and crossed his arms.

While the delegate thought this over, locked in deep concentration, the subdelegate took over. “Ayuha, you mentioned that the strain was great. What exactly do you mean by that?”

“Well, it’s difficult to describe in words...It’s like an uncontrollable surge of sound and light flowing through my mind. Keeping my concentration *just* on the sights I am seeking is extremely hard. And a single use of the past-scrying art is utterly exhausting. It should be possible to rewrite the formula to be more

efficient, but that will take time, too.”

“I see,” Asuna said, mulling it over. “Thank you, Ayuha.”

The leader of the artificers nodded, looking a little sheepish. Unlike the Integrity Knights, the sacred artificers did not have a frozen life span. So Ayuha was exactly as old as she looked—probably twenty-two or twenty-three. And on those rare occasions where she displayed emotion, it made her look even younger than her sister.

Maybe that's just because Soness never changes her expression, Ronie thought, and it's frozen on her face.

Regardless, the swordsman delegate continued, “Brigade Leader Furia, I’d like to ask you to continue deciphering the art of past-scrying but only to a degree that is safe. As far as Oroi’s care is concerned, I want to bring his travel companions we’re keeping at that inn in South Centoria here, to the cathedral. And I’ll speak with the head chef to see if we can cook something that reminds him a bit more of home.”

Ronie and Tiese, like the others on the council, were starting to intuitively understand many of the strange and unfamiliar sacred words that Kirito and Asuna used from time to time. When he said *care*, it wasn’t a word of the common tongue, but they got the sense that it referred to some kind of concern, an effort to make one feel better. To express these things in just one syllable like that was more convenient.

“I will handle these tasks...,” interrupted a forty-something-year-old man with square spectacles, the head of the cathedral’s materials management agency, but Kirito shook his head.

“No, I’ve been over there and eaten many of their meals...It’s going to take too long if you have to figure all that stuff out from scratch.”

In that regard, the agency head, having no experience outside the human realm, could only withdraw his claim.

The food of the mountain goblins consisted of whatever scrawny wheat they could cultivate on the barren mountainsides and wild nuts and grasses foraged around the wasteland. If you were lucky enough to catch one of the speedy

rock mice or fish up an armored trout from the canyon rivers, that was a feast. It would be difficult to re-create such food in Centoria, but it would all come down to the head chef's skill.

With that, the topics relating to the incident were finished. Ayuha then raised her hand again.

"Next, I have a report about replenishing the numbers of the sacred artificers brigade."

"So the screening process is finally complete? Congratulations on finishing," Fanatio said, motioning for her to continue. The brigade leader bowed and brought forth a stack of white hemp papers.

"Including apprentices, the sacred artificers brigade currently numbers three hundred and fifty-two, still far short of the five hundred it was before the Otherworld War. I would like to increase this number quickly, to bring about the plan to expand clinic coverage. Current plans are to bring in thirty more apprentices before the end of February..."

"Just a moment," interrupted Entokia, who'd been chowing down on the refreshments arranged on the table. Today's snack was an otherworld treat that Swordswoman Subdelegate Asuna herself fixed in the kitchen, something called a macaron. Only Ronie and Tiese knew that, because they'd helped her make them, but Entokia seemed to enjoy them quite a bit.

The short-haired knight popped the other half of a light-pink macaron baked with plum nectar into his mouth and continued, "I have no problem with bringing in more apprentices, but it takes years for one of them to be a full-fledged master, right? Shouldn't we be thinking of calling back those who left the cathedral first? They've got to have calmed down by now."

Entokia's suggestion caused all the members of the council—and even Ronie and Tiese—to share knowing looks. After the four bishops had been excommunicated, nearly a hundred artificers left the cathedral to join them. The majority of them were those who'd refused to join the Human Guardian Army, so Ronie's unspoken response to them was *Good riddance*. But in terms of skill, if not personality, they were clearly the world's finest masters of sacred arts. If those hundred missing members returned, the brigade would instantly

solve the issue of their lack of numbers...but...

“Hmm...,” Kirito murmured. He looked toward someone sitting at the corner of the round table. Actually, a round table by definition wouldn’t have any corners—and yet, for some reason, the area where that person sat was always a bit darker than the others. You couldn’t help but feel like it was the corner.

“Xiao, do you know what the people who left the Axiom Church have been doing since then?” the delegate asked a small woman wearing simple brown-and-gray clothing. She was Xiao Choucas, the head of the cathedral’s intelligence agency.

The intelligence agency was a new department created after the Human Unification Council, and it was designed primarily to collect information the senate had once controlled. But it still had few members, and Ronie had no idea who Xiao was or where she’d come from.

Xiao had dark-brown hair cut about as short as any woman dared, and though she barely spoke above a whisper, she had a mysterious voice that was also perfectly audible to the girls standing on the walkway above.

“We’re not able to track all of the artificers, but most of them sought work at the local churches throughout the land. Others became teachers at schools in larger towns, and in some rare cases, if they found wealthy collaborators, they opened places of prayer, and so on.”

Her monotone speaking style had none of the power of the knights’, but from what Ronie had heard, the young knights Linel and Fizel were flying all over the place on Xiao’s orders. She couldn’t begin to guess what sort of chain of authority they worked on.

“Hmm...So it sounds like they largely found peaceful and straightforward means of living...,” Kirito remarked.

Xiao regarded that comment with skepticism. “But it was about seventy percent of those who left the cathedral that we could confirm. The other thirty percent’s whereabouts are unknown, and we are currently unable to track their actions or locations.”

“I see...Thanks. We’ll think about how to increase your personnel numbers

later, too. As far as Entokia's idea, I think it's still too early for us to be reaching out to make contact. They probably still have their own feelings about it...but the ones working for the churches and schools might be willing to assist in our plan to expand the clinics, so I'll look into that one. I'm sorry to have interrupted you, Brigade Leader Furia. Please continue."

"I-in that case," said Ayuha, hurriedly packing away the rest of the macaron she'd been eating while Xiao talked. She looked down at the paper again. "Uh, we have thirty apprentices scheduled to join the cathedral by the end of the month, twenty-nine of whom are from Centoria and one from outside the city. I'll read them off now..."

Ayuha cleared her throat, then read the list of names belonging to those youngsters who would soon pass through the cathedral's gates, her voice clear and beautiful.

When Administrator still ruled, the only way to live inside the great white tower, whether nobleman or commoner, was to triumph in many fighting events, then become champion of the Four-Empire Unification Tournament. And even with that honor, your memories would be wiped out by the Synthesis Ritual.

So what of the priests and priestesses, then? The majority were born and raised within the Church, and unlike normal parents, who bore children out of love, priests and priestesses selected by Administrator for their desired traits were commanded to create children.

In other words, the majority of the holy men and women were born and raised in the cathedral tower. Ronie was oddly impressed that so many of them were able to make a living outside, but then again, unlike the Integrity Knights, the priests were allowed to oversee local churches, run errands, and otherwise learn about the lives of ordinary people.

After the death of the pontifex, however, no more children were born on her orders. So once all the children being raised inside the cathedral reached the age of twelve and became apprentices, the number of people in the sacred artificers brigade would no longer increase. And since the children were given their choice of a calling, they might not even want to stay.

So the number of sacred arts—users would have to be replenished from the outside. And it seemed like perhaps the choice of Ayuha Furia as the new leader was related to this crisis, because she had been invited—not that it was actually a choice—to the cathedral during Administrator’s era due to her remarkable skill with sacred arts...

These thoughts passed through Ronie’s mind as she let the list of recited names wash over her.

“...and those were the six from West Centoria. Next, five chosen from North Centoria. Chosen from the North Centoria local church: Apprentice Brother Ihal Dahlik, age thirteen; Apprentice Brother Matheom Torzell, age fourteen; Apprentice Sister Renon Simky, age thirteen; Apprentice Sister...”

“So nearly all of them are Church kids,” Tiese whispered. Ronie was going to respond “Well, of course they are,” but the fifth name to be read off the list made her completely forget what she was about to say.

“...and North Centoria Imperial Swordcraft Academy Elite Disciple Frenica Cesky, age seventeen.”

““Wh...whaaaaaaat?!””

The two screamed together, and Berche’s eyes snapped open at the sound. The big, dark-blue orbs filled with large tears, and he gasped for air before starting to wail.

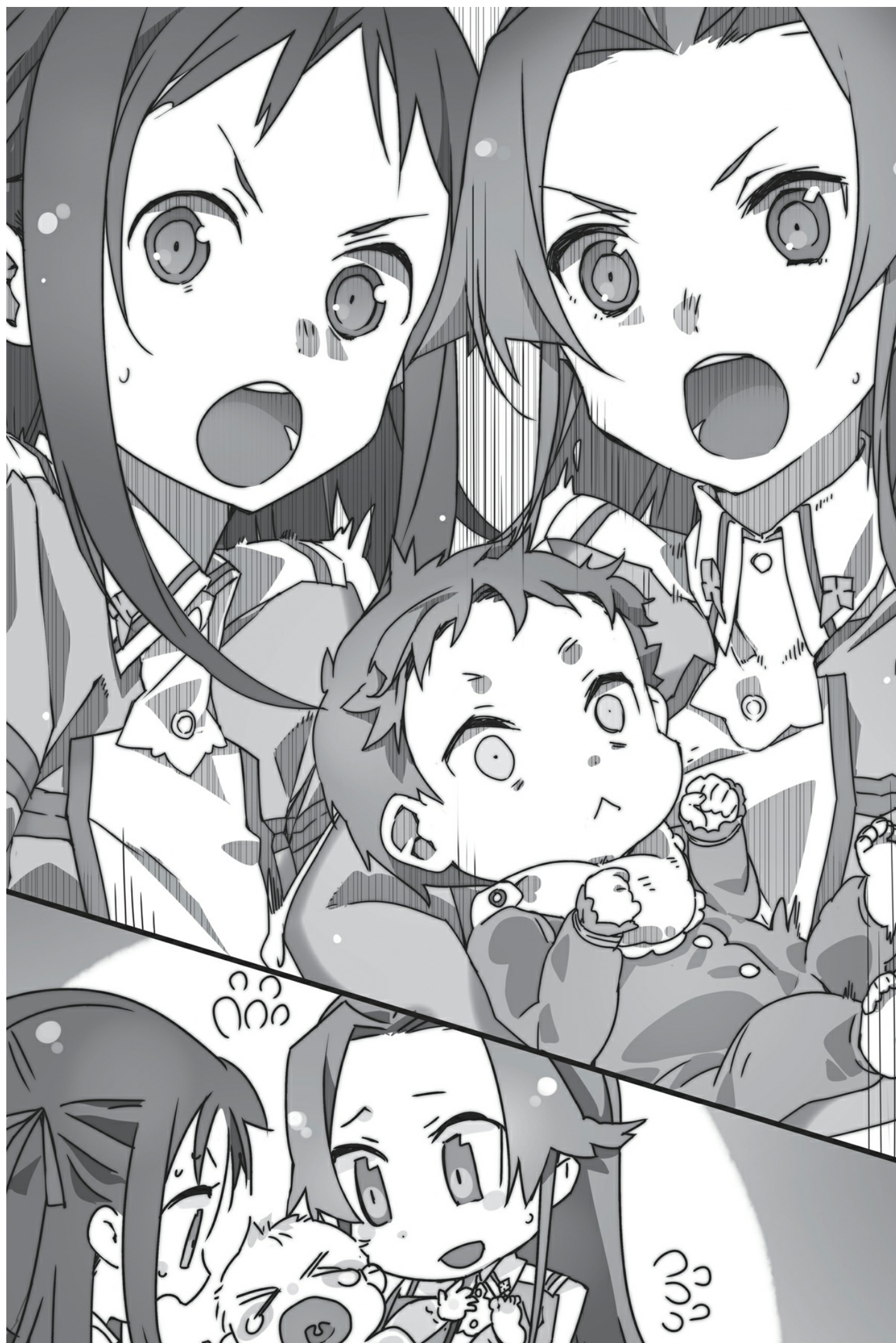
The girls bowed repeatedly to the council below and did their best to calm down the baby; however, they couldn’t help but stare at each other in shock. Eventually, they were both smiling. Ronie wanted to talk with Tiese about everything right now, but they had to wait until the meeting was over.

Ayuha cleared her throat again to restore order after the interruption and resumed reading.

“Those were the five from North Centoria. Lastly, one more from outside the capital...from the Norlangarth northern reaches, an apprentice sister at the church of Rulid, Selka Zuberger, age fifteen.”

“Wh...whaaaaaaat?!” shrieked a voice that did not belong to either Ronie or Tiese.

It came from the seat of honor at the round table, where just a moment ago the sleepy-looking swordsman delegate had been sitting.



“Oh, geez...That was a really...bad...reaction.....”

Ronie, Tiese, and Asuna stifled chuckles as they watched Kirito exhale, his head in his hands.

The long meeting was over at last, and baby Berche had been returned to his mother, Fanatio. The two girls headed for the cafeteria on the tenth floor, but Asuna stopped them before they could rush down the stairs. They couldn't turn down her invitation to share lunch, of course, so they accepted the request and followed her to the Morning Star Lookout on the ninety-fifth floor of Central Cathedral.

The lookout floor was open to the outside air, supported only by pillars. The majority of the floor held a beautiful garden with plants and flowers and a babbling brook. In practical terms, it was the top floor of the cathedral. Asuna had generated an indestructible door that blocked the stairs up to the ninety-sixth floor. Even the Integrity Knights and Kirito, the swordsman delegate, couldn't pass through it.

A white table was arranged in a corner of the garden, where the three girls sat. A few minutes later, Kirito showed up and groaned as soon as he sat down. The “reaction” he complained about, of course, was the way he had shouted when he heard Selka's name.

Ronie and Tiese shouted together when they'd heard Frenica's name listed, but she had shared a room with them in the primary trainee dorm at the academy, so that was only to be expected.

In Kirito's case, the situation was a bit more...no, a *lot* more complicated.

Kirito and Eugeo had left on their journey to Centoria from the northern village of Rulid, surpassing many trials on the way to Swordcraft Academy,

where they then told their pages, Ronie and Tiese, about them. But those stories had not been revealed to the entire cathedral.

That was because Kirito's reason for leaving Rulid was to take his friend, the now-legendary Golden Knight, Alice Synthesis Thirty, back from the Axiom Church.

Given that several of the knights still believed in Administrator's tall tale that the Integrity Knights were agents of the gods summoned from the heavens, any information about the birthplaces of Integrity Knights still had to be tightly controlled. On top of that, it was none other than the senior member of the Unification Council, Deusolbert Synthesis Seven, who had escorted young Alice from Rulid after her violation of the Taboo Index—and he did not have any memory of the event. Deusolbert seemed to be vaguely aware of the truth behind the Synthesis Ritual, but out of consideration for the younger knights, he did not speak about it.

At the morning meeting, Kirito weakly explained his surprise about Selka Zuberg's name by claiming that it "sounded like someone I once knew," and Fanatio and the others did not seem convinced.

Now Kirito sat at the lunch table, bemoaning his reaction. Asuna collected herself and comforted him. "Well, what's done is done, Kirito. Everyone was going to find out that you knew each other when Selka came here."

"Yeah, I know...but I was hoping I could have prepared before everyone got suspicious about it..."

"What could you have prepared? A cover story to share with Selka? I don't think that's the best idea, either..."

"I suppose you're right," Kirito agreed without lifting his face.

Tiese hesitated a bit before saying "Um...Kirito?"

"Hmm? What is it, Tiese?"

The swordsman delegate straightened up at last to look at her. The red-haired young woman still looked unsure of herself, and what she said next shocked even her friend Ronie.

“I think it would be best if you just explained the truth...Just tell all the Integrity Knights that they were born here in the mortal realm, just like everyone else.”

“H-hey, Tiese—,” Ronie said, trying to shush her friend. The Synthesis Ritual was the biggest secret this place had left, and it wasn’t right for mere apprentice knights to spill it.

But Kirito simply waved her off, smiling, and turned to Tiese. “Yes, I’m largely in agreement with you. The whole idea about being summoned from the celestial realm is starting to fall apart. I think that among the elder knights, Fanatio and Deusolbert and probably Sheyta have a significant grasp of the truth, so I think that someday, preferably soon, we should explain the truth to all of them. But...it’s just...”

He paused, looking at them reluctantly. “I’m sorry...I don’t want to remind you of painful memories...but do you recall the end of Raios Antinous?”

Both Ronie and Tiese stiffened at that name.

How could they ever forget? Raios Antinous was the first-seat Elite Disciple when the girls were pages to Kirito and Eugeo. He’d horribly mistreated Frenica, his own page, and when Ronie and Tiese went to accuse him of abuse, he used the system of “judicial authority” afforded to high nobles to shield himself—and attempted to defile them all.

Kirito and Eugeo burst into the bedroom just in time to rescue the girls, and when Kirito sliced off both of Raios’s arms, his end was shocking in a way that chilled her to think about, even now.

He did not perish from loss of blood. Before it came to that, he unleashed an unearthly scream no human should ever make and fell to the floor completely lifeless, as though his very soul had been obliterated. In the war after that, Ronie and Tiese saw many humans and demi-humans lose their lives, but none of them ever died quite like that.

The girls shivered despite themselves. Kirito and Asuna leaned over from the other side of the table and took their hands, joining them all at the center. The hands of these people from the real world felt warmer than any hands they’d ever felt, and they kept the chill afflicting Ronie at bay.

She nodded, unable to bring herself to say thanks. The two gave them smiles that were very similar in appearance, nodded back, and returned to their seats. Once she'd had a moment to breathe, Ronie asked, "What do Disciple Antinous's death and the Synthesis Ritual have in common...?"

Kirito immediately shook his head. "Not in common, not directly. But...when the people of the Underworld undergo extreme mental stress, there's a possibility that anyone could end up the way Raios did."

"What...?" they gasped, eyes wide.

He shook his head again, trying to set them at ease. "No, don't be afraid. You're all right. It only happens to those who are bound by extremely rigid conceptual views."

"Rigid...conceptual views?"

"That's right. At that moment, Raios's life and the Taboo Index were on opposite sides of a scale. He was like a being of pure ego; he prioritized nothing over his own life. But at the same time, the Taboo Index is an absolute law that cannot be violated under any circumstances. So should he violate the Taboo Index to preserve his own life or uphold the Taboo Index and die...? Raios was unable to choose one over the other, and it destroyed his mind."

When he was done speaking, Asuna looked both shaken and indignant, despite the fact that he'd surely shared that story with her, too. Kirito brushed her hands atop the table and continued, "Plus, from what Fanatio told us, in the battle to defend the Eastern Gate, the old chieftain of the giants lost control of himself and screamed in a strange fashion, the way Raios did. See, the giants maintain their sense of self by their unshakable belief that they are the strongest of all the races...So I think he went out of control when that fixed concept in his mind was uprooted, which shattered his sense of self. The problem is, I suspect that a few of the Integrity Knights consider their belief that they were summoned from the heavens to be just as important to their being."

Ronie had an up-close view of the Integrity Knights' strength and pride, and Kirito's concern was certainly enough for her to be worried as well. Naturally, learning that everything surrounding the Synthesis Ritual was a lie told to them by Administrator would be the most shocking thing they could hear.

But the knights, with their unshakable wills and refusal to leave any problems for others to solve, should be able to accept such a challenge. They wouldn't lose their minds in the way that Raio Antinous did.

Or was that just her own hope? Now that she traded words and took lessons in swordfighting and sacred arts from the Integrity Knights every day as an apprentice, was Ronie's admiration making her wish they could be the perfect, flawless beings she imagined them to be? Were her own personal feelings causing her to simply *believe* that about them...?

As Ronie lowered her head, deep in thought, Asuna said, "Um, Kirito. Something strikes me as strange. The Taboo Index is an absolute set of laws for the people of the human realm, right? So absolute that even trying to break those rules causes their minds to break down."

"Right...that's true. Normally the Seal of the Right Eye will activate to snuff out rebellious thoughts before you ever reach the point of a mental breakdown...but the seal didn't activate for Raio because he wasn't violating any taboo out of firm principle. He just wound up stuck in a contradictory mental loop where he had to protect both the Taboo Index and his own life—and couldn't choose just one."

"What does the word *loop* mean?" asked Tiese. Kirito gaped a little, looking guilty, and hastily explained himself.

"Sorry, I'm trying to be careful, but sometimes I just can't stop myself from using an Eng...I mean, a word in the sacred tongue. What I mean is a kind of circle of thoughts, something that repeats endlessly. Does that make sense?"

He looked toward Asuna for guidance, and she favored him with a smile. "I think that's a good explanation. It's also a verb for folding things into a circle, among other things."

"I see. Thank you!" said Tiese, and from the little pouch of her uniform—in the sacred tongue, they called it a *pocket*—she pulled out a small booklet of white hemp paper tied with string and a bronze pen. She flipped through the sheets of paper, already cramped with writing, until she found some blank space and wrote down the definition of the word *loop*.

"Oh...Tiese, what's that?"

“Heh-heh, I got some papers from the management agency. If I write them down here, I won’t forget all the sacred words before I can make use of them.”

“Wh-when did you do all this...?” Ronie wondered, alarmed that her homework-hating friend was undertaking such a surprising bit of enterprising effort. She elbowed her friend in the side and whispered, “Show me how you put it together later.”

“Hee-hee. Gosh, it sure would be nice to have some honey pies from the Jumping Deer...”

“Fine, fine. Sheesh...”

Kirito leaned back in his council chair, smiling to himself at the bickering, and said, “We’ll need to arrange for greater production of snow-white hemp at once. I’m hoping for three...no, five times as much as what we currently make.”

“Even ten times wouldn’t be enough,” interjected Asuna. “Ideally, you’d want enough supplies for every child in the human...no, the entire Underworld to have their own notebook and pen.”

“That would be wonderful...,” said Tiese, staring at her little sheaf of papers, apparently awakened to the joys of study. “Sheepskin parchment is very expensive, so lower noble children—like Ronie and me—had to write on it with water-soluble leafy lotus ink so we could wash and reuse it. Ordinary paper made from pounding white-thread grass is cheap, but its life runs out in just a week, when it crumbles away...If we could use as much of this white hemp paper as we want, I think *every* child would learn to love studying.”

“You’re right. And from there, we could make a bunch of textbooks,” Asuna suggested.

That caught Ronie’s attention. Kirito had briefly flown all over the human realm looking for materials that combined the durability of sheepskin and the practicality of normal paper. The snow-white hemp he eventually found grew only in the rocky mountains in the far reaches of the northern empire. The pure-white plant’s leaves and stem were chopped into fine pieces and boiled in a big pot until they formed a thick sludge that was spread out on a flat board, then dried instantly by heat and wind elements before the material’s life could run out. That changed it from low-durability “food” to high-durability “textile.”

Lastly, a huge rolling pin was used on the sheet over and over until it became white hemp paper.

One sheep could only provide sixty square cens of sheepskin paper, so this method was much cheaper, and the durability was nearly as high, but it was still a more involved process than simply smashing white-thread grass with wooden mallets, and snow-white hemp was impossible to acquire around the capital. At the moment, they'd tilled snow-white hemp fields near where it grew naturally and built four processing facilities in Centoria so they could sell the paper to the citizens of the capital, but it was still more expensive than ordinary paper. Even an amateur like Ronie could tell how difficult it would be to get the materials common enough that children in the dark lands could buy them cheaply.

But mass production of durable paper wasn't Kirito and Asuna's only goal. They wanted to produce textbooks that contained sacred vocabulary words, math equations, and arts commands.

"If there could be one textbook for every child, then they could study new things whenever they wanted. But..." Ronie said.

Tiese finished her thought. "Even a textbook of elementary sacred arts takes an experienced scribe an entire month to copy. And that's very expensive, of course...My father bought a textbook he couldn't really afford, because sacred arts are a necessary subject in the requirements to enter the academy. He had to buy one of the cheaper, quicker copies with smudged writing, and it was very frustrating for him. It's still one of my prized possessions, though."

Ronie had a similar experience, in fact. A textbook written carefully and cleanly in the same Axiom script used by the finest book in all of the human world, the Taboo Index, cost at least ten thousand shia per copy. That put it completely out of reach of the common people—and even the lower-ranked nobles. The quick copies put out by younger scribes in more informal shorthand were much cheaper, but they were still hefty purchases.

"You've got to take good care of it, then," said Kirito with a grin. "And one day —" He suddenly paused and sighed. "Well, mass production of white hemp paper for textbooks might be difficult, but we'll work on it. We've got plenty of time..."

“Yes...that’s right,” Asuna agreed. She put on a mischievous grin. “You know, Kirito, if there was a test for sacred arts on top of swordsmanship, I’m surprised you passed and got into the academy.”

“Uh, just so you know, I was within the top-twelve students...I assume. Of course, if I didn’t have Eugeo there to help me with the sacred arts stuff, I would’ve had trouble.”

That made Tiese giggle. But Ronie could sense there was more than just innocent delight in her reaction. All she could do was smile for her friend, however.

Asuna wore a sympathetic smile of her own. She looked out at the blue sky peeking through the pillars and suddenly became alarmed. “Oh no, you both must be hungry. Let’s eat lunch now. Can you help me bring it out?”

Ronie and Tiese agreed and rose from their seats together, with Kirito not a moment behind them. When she was his page, Ronie always said, “I’ll do it,” but even to this day, Kirito refused to sit and wait. *He really never changes*, she thought, walking behind Asuna.

Meanwhile, Tiese had removed her pad and pen again. “Excuse me, Lady Asuna, you mentioned the word *notebook* earlier. I assume that refers to this sheaf of papers?”

Ronie couldn’t help but clench her fists.

The ninety-fourth floor of the cathedral, one below the Morning Star Lookout, featured a fairly large cooking area, if not nearly as grand as the Great Kitchen on the tenth floor. The moment Asuna pushed open the double doors, the fragrant smells of honey and melting cheese wafted forth, causing Ronie’s stomach to clench with hunger.

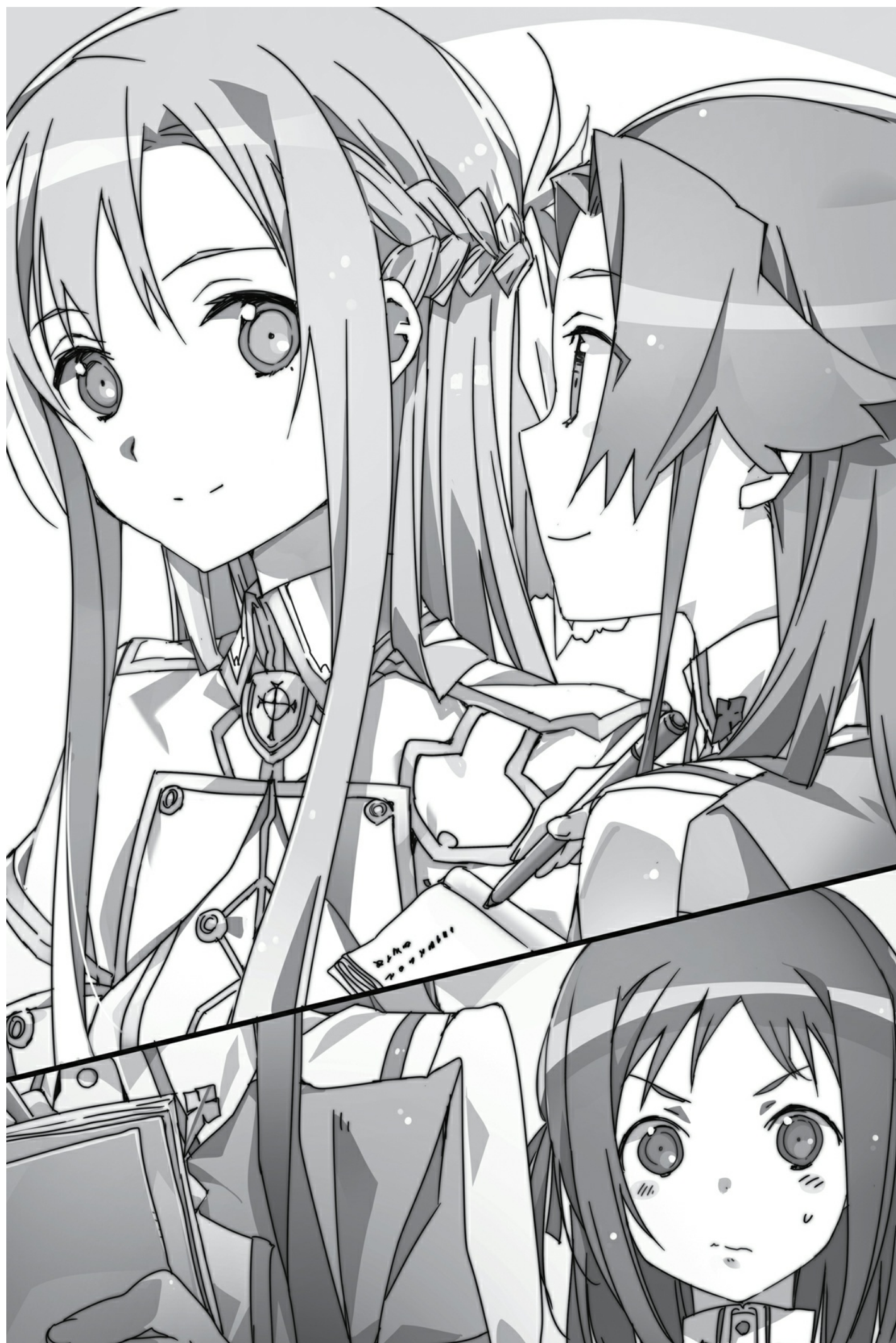
The kitchen’s floor and ceiling were white marble, but three walls were covered with tall shelves stuffed with ingredients and containers of every possible variety, creating a very busy appearance. The fourth wall featured shelves of cooking tools and a huge stove. There was a large wooden work counter in the middle of the spacious room.

As the four of them entered the kitchen, a willowy figure on the other side of

the counter looked up. A woman with a youthful face, she wore a conical hat atop her short hair and a spotless white apron.

The woman was sitting in a chair and polishing a large kitchen knife. When she saw them, she stood up smoothly, gave a little bow to Asuna, and said, “My lady, I have the dish already baked and waiting in the oven. The salad and bread are in the basket there.”

“Thank you, Hana. I’m sorry we took so long,” Asuna replied. She strode over to the large heat-element oven placed against the back wall of the kitchen. It had a sealable box built of stone and brick placed over a fire that heated up the entire enclosure. There was an Underworldian word for oven, but because it was a homophone with the word for the sunlight from Solus, it was often called *oven* in the common sacred tongue to differentiate the two. *Salad* and *bread* also fit into this category, so Tiese didn’t need to bother with getting out her vocabulary list.



Asuna put on some thick leather gloves before opening the oven door so she could pull out the large covered container inside. The smell of cheese wafted from the pot.

The baked dish consisted of a thin, kneaded crust spread into a flat pan and filled with all sorts of ingredients, but who ever heard of baking something by placing the dish into the oven itself? An oven was supposed to be for baking bread. As Ronie watched with excitement, Asuna moved the elliptical container to the countertop and carefully opened the lid.

“Wow...Wh-what is this...?” Tiese asked in suspicious awe. Ronie was equally confused.

What emerged from the container was slightly singed around the edges, white and thin, almost like...

“Hee-hee...It’s baked in paper,” Asuna proclaimed proudly, much to the shock of the two other girls.

“P-paper? Like...real paper? White hemp paper...?”

It seemed too far-fetched to be true, but the subdelegate just smiled and nodded. “I got some hemp paper from the cathedral’s processing center that had gotten burned in the drying stage, just so I could test this dish out.”

“B-but wouldn’t baking it in the oven cause the paper to burn up in moments?”

“It happened when I used ordinary paper, yes. I haven’t tried sheepskin paper, but I couldn’t use something that valuable for cooking anyway. But the hemp paper has just the right sturdiness, and it did exactly the job I wanted it to do.”

Asuna prodded the folded shell of paper with a finger. It made a dry crackling sound but did not fall apart. Despite being exposed to the withering heat of the heat-element oven, the paper’s life had been somehow preserved.

As she removed her leather gloves, Asuna said, “The methods of cooking in the Underworld are simple but follow some very strict principles. Whether you’re baking, grilling, or boiling, if you don’t heat it up enough for a certain

amount of time, the ingredients don't become 'food.' If the heat isn't high enough, the status will reflect it—it'll be in a half-cooked or a half-boiled state, and eating it might make your stomach hurt. If you heat it up too much, it goes into a burned state that makes it hard and bitter.”

“R-right...”

That was the very first thing any girl learned when her mother first started teaching her to cook: A little bit burned is better than not cooked enough, and everything needs to receive the proper amount of heat. The lessons brought the familiar warmth of nostalgia to Ronie's heart.

“The problem is,” Asuna continued, “the best flavor a dish can have is the instant it goes from half-cooked to freshly made. The more you heat it after that, the more the heat dries out the moisture and hardens the food—and the less you can taste the ingredients in a boiled dish. When you're stewing something, you can keep adding ingredients and heating it at a low temperature to produce a rich, saturated soup, but that takes too long.”

“R-right...” Ronie nodded. She could feel the strange taste of that mysterious Obsidia soup coming back to her tongue, so she quickly spoke up to distract herself from the sensation. “B-but what does that have to do with wrapping it in paper?”

“Well, first I tried to discern the exact moment that the filling was freshly cooked, but Hana here put a stop to that...”

Asuna looked over at the woman in the white hat, who barely batted an eye.

“That is the first and last trap that those whose calling is to be a cook tend to fall into,” the woman agreed. “Even the most experienced cook cannot perfectly predict the moment of completion every single time. Long in the past, a cook who was said to be a once-in-a-century master of this insight was invited to the Imperial Palace to cook for the emperor of Norlangarth. The appetizer and soup were absolutely picturesque, but the main dish of great red-horned cattle steak was just an instant away from being finished when he pulled it out. As a result, the emperor became sick from eating it, and through the process of judicial authority, the cook's arms were lopped clean off.”

Ronie and Tiese were stunned into silence. Asuna just shook her head and

said, “And that’s why I gave up on anticipating the perfect moment and made sure to cook it all the way through. Instead, I asked Hana if there was a way to cook it thoroughly over time that doesn’t lose the moisture, and she told me that baking something in the oven inside a covered dish makes it taste different.”

“Ohhhh...I’ve learned a lot about cooking, but I never even considered such an idea. I can see why she’s the personal chef to the pontifex,” Tiese marveled.

The woman named Hana just shrugged. “That was all in the past. Only Central Cathedral has a container of high enough priority that it can be heated up in the oven without cracking. And the cooking process is still imperfect...Because the moisture can’t escape, it builds up inside the container, half boiling the contents, and their flavor ends up weaker.”

“So my first idea was to try the traditional baked-in method and wrap the ingredients inside a flour crust before putting it into the container. But that just meant that the flavor and moisture were escaping into the crust...If you’re eating the food with the crust, that’s all right, but it still means the filling itself is less tasty. So I was trying to think of things that could wrap the insides, wouldn’t absorb water, and still resist the heat, and I ended up testing this paper.”

“Oh...so that’s why it’s wrapped in paper...,” Ronie murmured, staring into the container.

“Um, can we go ahead and open it up now?” whined the swordsman delegate, who’d been waiting patiently this whole time. He’d been trying to resist his hunger throughout the explanation, but that was as far as he could get.

Asuna chuckled and reached out to pinch the end of the lightly charred paper. “Today was actually our very first test with it. If the insides aren’t right, we’ll only be having a lunch of salad and bread. Apologies in advance.”

“Wh-what?” stammered both Kirito and Tiese. Ronie was in the same boat, of course. She prayed to Terraria, the goddess of all blessings of the earth, including food, and watched Asuna perform the last step.

She peeled the sheets of paper away one at a time, until the last of them spread apart left and right, unleashing an indescribably rich scent that made

Ronie swoon.

The main ingredient was sliced pale fish, with mushrooms, vegetables, and herbs aplenty, plus a solid layer of cheese melted on top. It was clear at a glance that it had been cooked enough, but unlike when baked in a pot, it wasn't burned and hadn't shrunk at all. It seemed like all the moisture had stayed inside.

"That looks good," said Hana. Asuna agreed.

"Let's divide it into servings while it's still hot. Five plates, please, Kirito."

Despite repeated attempts to decline, Hana eventually gave in to Asuna's insistence and took the fifth serving of paper-baked fish as the group carried their plates and foodstuffs back to the table on the ninety-fifth floor.

Perhaps drawing on his experience as a page, Kirito deftly helped set the table, and within just a few minutes, everything was ready. They toasted with warm siral water and picked up their silverware.

Each portion of fish was steaming heartily, rich and tempting on its plate, but Ronie took a cautious sniff first, just in case. Among the scent of vegetables, mushrooms, and melted cheese, there wasn't even the slightest whiff of charred paper.

The slices of fish were juicy and firm, yet a simple press of the knife easily split them apart. The first thing she noticed upon lifting it to her mouth was the soft texture. It was very moist—and hard to believe it was actually cooked all the way.

"Wow...it's completely different from the usual cooking over an open flame! This is incredibly good!" raved Tiese, prompting Ronie to nod vigorously in agreement. Asuna tasted hers very carefully, bobbing her head, but not to the same level of vehemence.

"Yes, it's kept all the moisture, like I was hoping...but it just doesn't have that fragrance of a good open grilling...It feels like there might still be the slightest bit of rawness to it."

"What if we remove the lid and the paper right near the end and sear it with heat elements?" Hana suggested.

Asuna's face lit up. "That sounds good. Just a little crispness on the surface should really make the fragrance sing. Let's try removing it from the heat twenty seconds earlier next time so we can give that an attempt."

While the two cooks discussed ideas, Kirito silently—rapturously—moved his fork from plate to mouth. Ronie was afraid he was going to finish his entire meal without a word, so she turned to her right to face him and whispered, "Um, what about the taste...?"

"...Mmuh?" mumbled the swordsman delegate, his cheeks stuffed with fish, vegetables, and mushrooms. He chewed a few times, then exclaimed, "If' good!"

That earned him an eye roll from Asuna. "We weren't looking for brilliant insights from a culinary critic...but you could stand to give me *something* more to work with."

"Uh...th-then...it's so good, I could even eat the paper it's wrapped in!"

The three who knew him all too well sighed heavily, and Hana politely maintained an utterly straight face, but Ronie could see her shoulders briefly twitch.

In thirty minutes, their delightful lunch was over, and since Hana firmly insisted this time, they allowed her to clean up before going back to her kitchen. The four of them left on the ninety-fifth floor sat in very contented silence for a while.

It was hard to even count the number of revolutionary changes, big and small, that the real-worlders Kirito and Asuna had brought to the Underworld. The biggest of all was undoubtedly the reformation of the nobility system, but to Ronie, the most meaningful were practical, everyday ideas like the development of hemp paper and its applications, such as this one for baking.

They were currently working on building clinics in smaller towns and villages, not just the larger cities where they could only be found today. People who got hurt or sick in rural villages had to go to the lone holy brother or sister at the local church. If multiple people were hurt at once, it wasn't uncommon for the priests and priestesses not to be able to help them all in time. Using high-level light-element arts for healing was just as hard as working with dark elements,

so an inexperienced user might not be able to help someone with a life-threatening condition.

If they could build staffed clinics in every town and village, there would be a vast decline in the number of people dying from accidents and contagious diseases. Apparently, they wanted to expand not just high-level healing arts but common medical care with herbs, bandages, and salves as well.

Ronie thought it was wonderful that their plans were helping the world move in a better direction. But at the same time, she found herself plagued by vague worries.

In the three hundred years of Administrator's rule, beginning at the formation of the four empires that split the land, there had been virtually no change in the realm. This was because the pontifex herself sought a kind of permanent stasis for it, and the result was that the cruelty of the high nobles, and the unequal quality of life between urban and rural areas, was left unsolved. The main value to the system was just that things weren't getting *worse* than that, either.

But Kirito and Asuna were tireless in their attempts to improve the quality of life for the whole of the Underworld. Even the single act of releasing the civilians being tormented by the high nobles on their private lands had been a clear change for the better.

Yet it felt as though the more the world changed, the more people's hopes for the Unification Council—and especially Kirito and Asuna—grew without boundaries. To Ronie, the apprentice knight, they seemed to have a near-godly source of power, but they weren't all-knowing, all-capable beings. Kirito still regretted and mourned his inability to save Eugeo, and that was why Ronie worried about this situation. If some unavoidable danger that surpassed Kirito's and Asuna's strength and wisdom came about—something even more calamitous than the Otherworld War—the thought of what the people would say and do to Kirito and Asuna frightened Ronie to her core...

"Um...Lady Asuna," said Tiese, drawing Ronie's mind out from its cycle of nervous thoughts. Asuna blinked and paused in sipping her post-lunch cofil tea.

"What is it, Tiese?"

"Weren't you about to say something before we ate lunch...? Something

about the Taboo Index.”

“Oh...was I?” Asuna wondered. Ronie played back the memories in her mind.

They’d been talking about the wisdom of whether to reveal the truth of the Synthesis Ritual to the senior Integrity Knights, when it seemed like Asuna was about to ask Kirito something about the Taboo Index. When Kirito had started talking about the loop of contradictory thoughts Raio Antinous fell into, Tiese had interrupted to ask what the meaning of the sacred word *loop* was, diverting the conversation to the topics of Tiese’s pad of words to remember and increasing the production of white hemp paper. In other words...

“Hey...Tiese! It was your fault Lady Asuna couldn’t talk about her topic!” Ronie hissed. Tiese realized her mistake and stuck out her tongue.

“Ah-ha-ha-ha, I think you’re right.”

“Well, good going...I’m sorry about this, Lady Asuna,” Ronie said, apologizing for her friend.

The swordswoman subdelegate just laughed and shook her head. “It’s fine. If you’re ever curious about anything, all you have to do is ask. Anyway...as for what I was trying to ask,” she said, turning to her left, “Kirito...your understanding is that the Taboo Index is an absolute rule, and those who break it either activate the Seal of the Right Eye, or in a worst-case scenario, their minds simply collapse...Is that correct?”

Kirito nodded as he gave his cofil some milk squeezed from the cathedral stables just that morning. “Yes, I think that’s fundamentally how it goes.”

“Then...whoever killed Yazen the cleaner at the inn in South Centoria either broke the seal in their eye, avoided the taboo somehow, or was never bound by the Taboo Index in the first place, correct?”

“Yes, I assume it’s...one of those three. The problem is, if the third one is the case...then the culprit is from the Dark Territory, not the human realm. And that would require breaking the Law of Power from over there, which is just as powerful as the Taboo Index. Iskahn is the strongest man in the dark lands, and he put out an order to all that they’re not to commit any wrongs while in this realm...”

Ronie decided to take up Asuna on her offer to explain any questions they had and raised her hand. “Um, may I ask something...?”

“What is it, Ronie?”

“On that topic...when the man in the robe kidnapped Iskahn and Sheyta’s baby, he was clearly ignoring the Law of Power. He took Lea hostage, then ordered Iskahn to kill you...”

Asuna had read the detailed report about the incident, and Tiese had heard it directly from Ronie, but they both stiffened anyway. Kirito seemed unfazed, however.

“That’s right,” he said. “Meaning, either the kidnapper believes he’s stronger than Iskahn, or he’s following the orders of someone whom he believes qualifies as stronger, I’m guessing.”

“But that just feels...so vague to me. How do the people of the dark realm determine the strength of those they ought to follow? I mean, I assume they aren’t fighting each and every person individually.”

“Iskahn used to be the leader of the pugilists guild. That’s more like sparring or dueling than fighting...but you’re right, the entire population as a whole isn’t challenging him together. It’s more like, each race and guild and group of people choose their strongest member to be the chief, and before the war, those leaders made up a group called the Council of Ten, who decided on laws and such. Now it’s changed to the Council of Five Peoples, but it still works the same way...and out of those leaders, Iskahn is considered to be the strongest in terms of individual battle power.”

“In that case, if the kidnapper believed he was stronger than Iskahn, that alone wouldn’t violate the Law of Power, right?” Ronie wondered. “It would have to be proven by fighting Iskahn and beating him.”

Kirito crossed his arms. “Mmm,” he hummed. “I guess it depends on the strength of his belief...During the Rebellion of the Four Empires, the emperors broke the very first rule of the Taboo Index and rebelled against the Axiom Church. Their belief that the Unification Council had taken over the Axiom Church, and their self-justification that they were taking the Church back for the sake of the pontifex, overrode the influence of the Taboo Index. If the

kidnapper believed in something strong enough to cause that kind of state of mind, then maybe he could overcome the Law of Power without actually fighting Iskahn.”

Ronie recalled the aura of pure self-belief that oozed from the being of Emperor Cruiga Norlangarth VI and felt a chill run down her back. Nearby, Tiese hunched her shoulders and murmured, “The emperor didn’t seem to care at all about what the Unification Council ordered...but that was because the imperial line had been in charge for hundreds of years. Is it really possible that someone without that kind of accumulated background could rebel against a higher power, just through the power of sheer belief?”

It was Asuna, whose topic of conversation had once again been interrupted, who replied, “That’s a good point. Whether the Taboo Index or the Law of Power, it seems clear that the violator needs a very firm backbone of belief and justification to override the law. Oh, and when I say *backbone*, I mean spine, or backing, or mental support.”

“O-oh.”

“In fact...that’s what I was trying to ask you about, Kirito,” said Asuna, looking to her partner. He blinked in surprise.

“What...?”

“Regardless of whether the culprit is a resident of the human realm or dark realm, it means that either the killer, or the person who ordered the killer do it, has just as strong and twisted a mind as the four emperors’. What mystifies me is that if such people are out there, couldn’t they have done something more drastic...something as bold as kidnapping Leazetta in the Dark Territory, but over here? That’s not to demean the value of Yazen’s life...but frankly, if the culprit is trying to sow discord between the human realm and dark realm, wouldn’t there be a more effective target for the plot?”

“Meaning, someone in a position of social power...like a noble, or a major merchant, or their family? Yeah...,” Kirito murmured.

Ronie watched him think, then added, “Um, b-but if the Yazen incident was meant to get you to travel to the Dark Territory, then wouldn’t it not have mattered who they went after, as long as it got you to leave?”

“Yes...that makes sense. But if I were the culprit, I’d be trying to pull off something that makes more of an impact. Because that would be more likely to lure me over to Obsidia...”

As he grumbled and thought, Tiese surreptitiously asked Asuna what the sacred word *impact* meant. She was really getting her value out of that notebook today.

You know, I wonder if Obsidia and Centoria were named after some sacred words as well. What would they correspond to? Ronie chewed on the thought.

Then Asuna drained the last of her lightly sweetened cofil tea and said crisply, “Kirito, I think it’s worth a try.”

“Er...try? Try what?” he replied, looking at her with more than a small amount of foreboding. Asuna’s answer shocked not just Ronie and Tiese, of course, but even the swordsman delegate, the very personification of attempting the impossible.

“The past-scrying art Ayuha mentioned. If we really can see what happened in the past and attempt to use it in the room where the murder happened, we should be able to see who the killer really was.”

With lunch on the ninety-fifth floor concluded, Ronie returned to her private room on the twenty-second floor. As her best friend tried to slip through the shared space into her own room, she called out to her.

“Oh, Tiese, I was going to ask you how you made that sheaf of papers you carry around with—”

“Notebook.”

“What?”

“I’m going to call it a notebook in the sacred tongue. It’s shorter that way. And I think it suits it better,” Tiese proclaimed, pulling out her notebook to show it off. Ronie gave her a searching look.

“...What, Ronie? Why are you looking at me like that?”

“Oh, no reason. It’s fine...It’s just that if you keep using every new sacred word you’ve just learned, Sir Deusolbert is eventually going to grumble about you and say something like ‘Young people these days...’”

“Well, then I can teach him what they mean.”

“That’s not my point...Anyway! Can you show me how you made it?” Ronie insisted. She didn’t want her friend to pull too far ahead of her and leave her behind.

Tiese smirked and clutched her booklet to her chest. “Of course I can, but I’ll warn you, it was pretty difficult to bind such thick hemp paper together like this...”

“...Fine. I’ll give you one raspberry tart from Honis’s Bakery.”

“Deal,” Tiese said solemnly, pulling out a sheet of folded paper from her other pocket. Based on the flimsiness and color, this was normal paper, not white

hemp, but nevertheless, it was crammed with tiny writing.

“There. Kind, considerate Tiese has already written down the instructions to create a notebook for poor, helpless Ronie. The most important part is using thread that is fine but tough.”

“...Th-thanks...”

Ronie took the paper, surprised. Tiese must have created this little sheet—called a *memo* in the sacred tongue, if she recalled correctly—for her sake a while ago.

“Thank you, Tiese,” she repeated, firmly this time, taking her friend’s hand in both of hers. Now it was Tiese’s turn to blink a few times in surprise. She laughed awkwardly.

Now that Ronie knew how it was made, she wanted to rush right down to the paper-processing room on the twelfth floor to get a scrap of the new stock, but sadly, that would have to wait. She changed into her knight’s uniform to go out, put her gray cloak around her shoulders, and joined her friend in heading downstairs.

They left the main doors on the ground level, the gentle afternoon sun warming their skin. The February breeze was cold, but you could sense that it was getting balmier with each successive day.

After crossing the neatly laid white tiles of the entry plaza, they walked over the grassy lawn in a southwest direction. Normally, they’d go to their juvenile dragons, Tsukigake and Shimosaki, at the stables and spend time with them until the evening, but that would have to wait today. They had a very important duty to perform first.

The girls rushed on until the spacious lawn turned into a fruit garden lined with trees. Of course, nearly all the trees were bare in this season, but there was such a variety here that even winter fruit like black apples and ice figs were available. A sweet scent wafted through the area.

Despite just having eaten a very filling lunch, they had to resist the urge to pluck just one of the rare figs, light blue and translucent, on their way through the trees, until at last a huge wall came into view before them. It was the

marble wall that separated the Central Cathedral grounds from the rest of the world.

Near the corner where the south wall and western wall met, Kirito and Asuna were already waiting for them. They wore plain brown cloaks and waved their hands when they saw the girls approaching. Ronie and Tiese rushed the last few dozen mels and came to a screeching halt with their heads bowed.

“We’re sorry we kept you waiting.”

“It’s fine; we just got here ourselves,” Asuna reassured.

Kirito smirked and added, “We jumped down out of the cathedral and saw you below us.”

Apparently, while they’d been running, Kirito used his ability to fly with Incarnation to zip past them through the air. *If I can’t do it with Incarnation, I want to at least learn how to fly with wind elements*, Ronie swore to herself.

“So, um...why did you choose this as our meeting place?” she asked, looking around.

Their destination was in the middle of South Centoria, which would require them to pass through the gate that was in the middle of the cathedral’s southern wall. But this was the corner where the two marble walls met, with no form of passage anywhere to be seen.

Maybe we’re going to use some hidden doorway I wasn’t aware of? she wondered.

But Kirito just shrugged. “Opening and closing the main gate causes a scene... There will be a bunch of visitors in the square just beyond the gate at this hour, so there’s no way to get past without drawing attention to ourselves.”

“Then why don’t we fly like the other time?” asked Tiese hopefully. Four days ago, when word of the murder in South Centoria had first arrived, Kirito had picked up Ronie under his arm and flown through the air from the terrace at the top of the cathedral, using wind elements to reach their destination. The trip took less than a minute, and flying unsupported through the open air was a thrilling experience. You couldn’t blame Tiese for being excited.

But Kirito just grimaced and shook his head. “Actually, that draws plenty of attention, too,” he said, then quickly added, “but I was thinking we might test out a secret shortcut today.”

“S-secret shortcut?” Tiese repeated, too surprised to feel disappointed by his answer. The swordsman delegate gave her an impish smile and provided no explanation.

Instead, he raised his arms and said, “Okay, let’s all hold hands in a circle.”

“...?”

Bemused, Ronie extended her left hand to hold Kirito’s and her right hand toward Tiese. Opposite her, Asuna did the same, looking a bit resigned. The four of them were now forming a circle.

Then a series of green lights blinked in succession in the center of the circle, and a strong gust of wind flattened the grass at their feet. Ronie squeezed with both of her hands instinctively as the wind pressure pushed her into the air from below.

“Whoa! Whoaaaaaaa!” Tiese shouted, kicking her feet. But she did not return to the ground; they continued to rise at a speed of about one mel per second.

Even Ronie, who was a bit more familiar with Kirito’s nature than her friend, held her breath at this unfamiliar experience, but she had enough presence of mind to watch what was happening. The wind elements burst beneath them again and again, creating powerful gusts of wind, yet the branches of the trees around them merely swayed as if in a gentle breeze. Further examination told her there was a very faint rainbow sheen surrounding their circle. That was the light of Incarnation—most likely, Kirito was using his knight’s skill of Incarnate Arms to form a cylindrical, transparent wall around them that blocked the wind, forcing the unleashed wind elements into a strong upward current that was lifting them vertically. It operated on the same principles as the elevating disc inside the cathedral.

Despite her initial panic, in less than ten seconds, Tiese had regained her poise, and she swung her head around to look at the sights. “Ha-ha! This is amazing, Ronie! We’re flying!” she marveled.

“Be careful, Tiese; don’t let go of our hands!” Ronie scolded, strengthening her grip. The four of them were picking up speed now. The ground was far below, but the white wall that blocked their side view showed no signs of ending. She looked up with trepidation and saw that the crisp line that marked the boundary between wall and pale winter sky was still far away.

What if Kirito’s concentration lapses, or the spatial sacred power dries up? she wondered, then forced those thoughts out of her mind and focused on the space above them. Their ascent continued for twenty more seconds, tilting a bit diagonally at the end, until they were on top of the wall at last.

Suddenly, the wind pressure vanished, and they promptly dropped about two mels to land. That wasn’t a very tall height when Ronie and Tiese did their pillar-balancing training, but their legs weren’t ready for the sudden ground, and they nearly fell onto their bottoms.

With Kirito’s support, Ronie managed to straighten and see what lay just ahead of them.

She couldn’t help but gasp “*Ohhh...*”

In terms of height, they had only ascended about ten floors of the cathedral—maybe fifty mels at most. But from the cathedral itself, the city was hazy and distant, and now it was all laid out before her, close enough to touch. And not just that—they were standing at the intersection point of the southern and western walls, and at that same height, the wall continued into infinity in the southwest direction.

“...We’re atop the Everlasting Walls...,” Tiese murmured with wonder. Kirito nodded.

The Everlasting Walls: the white-marble wonders that split Centoria into cardinal quadrants—and all of the territory that extended beyond the city as well. The walls were not built by stonemasons stacking blocks but through the divine work of Administrator, supposedly in a single night.

From the external corners of Central Cathedral, the walls continued all the way to the distant End Mountains, which surrounded the lands of humankind, a distance of 750 kilors. Like their name suggested, they were essentially indestructible and impervious to everything. The Taboo Index forbade climbing

them or harming them, so no one would have attempted to cause damage, but Ronie was certainly violating the other taboo.

While she might have been freed from the Taboo Index when she became an apprentice Integrity Knight, that didn't erase the years of fear and reverence for those rules. Ronie found herself standing on her tiptoes to lessen the trespass she was committing. She looked down at her feet.

The marble was stacked and arranged without so much as a milice of space between any block, and despite hundreds of years of exposure to wind and rain, it shone as smooth as if it had just been polished. The nearby corner of the wall was as sharp as a blade's edge, defying any who would be rebellious enough to attempt to scale it.

Just then, she heard the light fluttering of wings. Overhead, two pale-blue birds descended upon the top of the wall. They hopped back and forth atop the marble, staring at Ronie with beady black eyes.

"...Hee-hee. I guess the Taboo Index doesn't have any effect on birds," Asuna remarked. The tension went out of Ronie's neck and shoulders; she looked at her best friend, and the two of them laughed.

She looked at the city below again and said, "Oh, I see...You want to move atop the wall until we reach the inn in the fourth district of South Centoria, right?"

Kirito turned to her and grinned. "Correct. They can't see us walking up here from below, so once we find a good place to jump down, it'll be surprisingly easy to avoid notice from the citizens, you'll find."

"From the way you say that, I take it you've done it before?" Asuna noted promptly, causing Kirito's eyes to bulge briefly. He cleared his throat awkwardly.

"Er, w-well, you know, confirming your escape route is the bedrock of strategy, so...Anyway, let's hurry," he said, rushing away. Asuna shook her head in exasperation, but she and the girls followed nonetheless.

The Everlasting Walls, which split the human realm into four pieces, each had their own unofficial names.

The northeast Spring Wall separated Norlangarth and Eastavarieth. The southeast Summer Wall separated Eastavarieth and Sothercrois. The southwest Autumn Wall separated Sothercrois and Wesdarath. And the northwest Winter Wall separated Wesdarath and Norlangarth.

Not even Fanatio and Deusolbert, the oldest of the Integrity Knights, knew how the four walls wound up with this unified naming scheme. Until the Human Unification Council started up, the Everlasting Walls were absolutely inviolable national boundaries, and the citizens of the four regions of Centoria were basically prevented from mingling. The only ones who could traverse the single gate in each wall were traders or wealthy tourists who had passes that authorized such travel.

The regulations about using the gates had been greatly relaxed, but it still wasn't completely free. That was because the aftershocks of the Rebellion of the Four Empires had not entirely settled yet. Somewhere in the realm, the remainders of the Imperial Knights who fought back against the Axiom Church still lurked, possibly following orders from the emperors. Yazen's murder and Leazetta's kidnapping might have even been their work.

Ronie considered these things as she walked atop the Autumn Wall. The wall was four mels wide, so as long as she didn't get too close to the edge, there was no worry about slipping, and no one could see them from the ground. Soon the cold winds blew her concerns away, leaving her mind empty of all thoughts except taking in the sight of the city around her.

On the left side of the wall was South Centoria, with its buildings made of reddish sandstone, and on the right was West Centoria, where the homes were constructed of blackish slate. Separated by a single wall, the cities were wildly different not just in color but in decoration and design. In South Centoria, the red rock was cut in clean squares that stacked up with plenty of space, creating an air of openness, while in West Centoria, the delicate sheets of slate were reinforced and rearranged, with precisely fitted roofs covered in tiles like dragon scales, with all the care and complexity of fine art.

According to Kirito, the four Centorias didn't just look different, their food was completely distinct from one another as well. Ronie and Tiese could go anywhere throughout the four quadrants if they wanted, but they felt a bit self-

conscious about doing so, and when they went into the city, it was always to their home of North Centoria.

Perhaps it wasn't right for the Integrity Knights sworn to protect the entire four empires to show such favoritism, Ronie was going to tell Tiese, when Kirito stopped them short.

"The fourth district is right around here...I wonder where that inn is..." he muttered, looking over South Centoria. Ronie turned to her left to examine the reddish-brown town beneath her.

Inn, inn, inn, she thought, gazing at the city, until she realized she hadn't actually visited the inn where the crime occurred. By the time the report had reached the cathedral four days ago, Oroi the mountain goblin was already held at the city guard's office on suspicion of the murder, so Kirito had gone straight there.

"Um...Kirito, did you bring us here without actually knowing where the inn is?" Ronie asked quietly. He looked away and kind of sort of nodded.

"Erm, w-well, I suppose so. But you know, there's going to be a sign that says INN, so I figured we could see it from above..."

"When you have an entire city's worth of buildings down there, there's no guarantee we'll just conveniently spot the one sign we need!" Tiese snapped, quite reasonably. Kirito turned a different direction this time and mumbled that she was right. Asuna shook her head once again, then pulled out a folded piece of hemp paper from her cloak.

This one, of course, wasn't holding baked goods inside. It unfolded to reveal a map. And this one was much more detailed than the kind sold in the city. It had details not just about each street, but even individual buildings.

"Whoa...where'd you get that?" Kirito wondered.

Asuna turned to him with a smug expression and said, "Soness happened to find a collection of maps while sorting through the library, and she copied it between study sessions. She said that the original map book wasn't drawn by hand, but the previous scribe had created it through some mystery arts."

"...Ah...the previous one..." murmured Kirito, looking momentarily pained,

but it passed quickly, and he leaned closer to examine Asuna's map. "Let's see. So this is the fourth district...and this is that street. Which would mean the inn is around here..."

He straightened and looked at the eastern side of the wall they stood upon. "Oh, it's probably on the north end of that intersection there. Thanks, Asuna," he said, expressing his gratitude with a word in the sacred tongue.

"You're welcome," the subdelegate replied in the common language instead. She folded the map and put it back into her cloak.

Now they knew their destination, but that didn't solve all their problems. They had to descend a fifty-mel wall into the city without attracting the notice of any citizens. And if they used wind elements the way they did to get up in the first place, they would absolutely be spotted.

Ronie looked to Kirito, wondering what his plan was. The swordsman walked to the edge and peered over the side.

"Okay, nobody's down there. I'll go first. Once I give the signal, you guys jump down."

"Jeeee?!" Tiese screeched mysteriously. Kirito just thrust out his fist with a thumbs-up, then leaped over the side of the wall. His brown cloak vanished in moments, leaving the three women with nothing but a dry breeze for company.

After several seconds, they hadn't heard any huge crashes from below, so Ronie joined Asuna and Tiese at the edge of the wall, and they peered down. There on the street, an entire fifty mels below, stood Kirito, casually waving at them.

"Good grief...", Asuna muttered. She held out her hands toward Ronie and Tiese.

"I swear I'm going to learn how to fly," Tiese promised, a mirror of Ronie's thoughts earlier, taking Asuna's hand. Ronie gave up and grabbed the other one. It was stunningly fragile, her skin as smooth as the finest silk, and just a little bit warm. Asuna squeezed Ronie's hand back, and the next second, with just as much boldness as Kirito had shown the first time, Asuna leaped off the marble wall.

The moment of floating weightlessness lasted only an instant, after which the three plummeted like rocks. The wind howled in their ears. Ronie wanted to scream, but she had to grit her teeth to fight the urge, lest someone hear them falling.

Even an apprentice Integrity Knight wasn't going to survive a fifty-meter fall onto hard stone tiles. *I'm trusting you, Kirito!* she screamed inwardly.

Just at that moment, right near where they were going to land, Kirito lifted his hands to form a bowl shape. Suddenly, it felt like something invisible was softly enveloping her body. Her falling speed slowed, and the howling of the wind quieted down. Kirito had used Incarnate Arms to grab the three of them.

It was said that even the senior Integrity Knights could do no more than move a single dagger, but he had just slowed down three people in a free fall—a tremendous use of Incarnation that was surprising despite his many prior exhibitions. Kirito spread his hands open when they were just ten centimeters off the ground, and they plopped downward to the surface. All three of them exhaled deeply, and Ronie quickly turned against her former tutor.

“Um, Kirito, if you could do this all along, what was the point of using the wind elements on the way up...?”

“Well, catching something falling and something flying straight upward are completely different levels of difficulty to imagine. Just on my own, I have to transform my clothes into wings so I can fly with Incarnation...,” he said, shrugging.

“I want to jump down on my own next time!” Tiese cut in. “Please teach me how to use the wind elements like that!”

“Huh?! That's not as easy as it looks...But I guess it's good to be ambitious. Anyway, let's hurry and get to that inn,” Kirito said, without actually replying to her request. He started walking north, but Asuna grabbed him by the back of the collar.

“Wrong direction, Kirito.”

They turned left down the darkened alley in the shadow of the Everlasting Wall, and once they were on the wider street, there were suddenly more

people around. It was February, so you'd figure that long cloaks wouldn't be a rare sight outdoors, but the South Centorians were dressed surprisingly light. North Centoria wasn't even a single kilor away, so the temperature couldn't change *that* much, but for some reason, the sunlight shining on the sandstone city seemed warmer than it did at Central Cathedral.

Fortunately, no guards stopped them, so the four were able to cross the fourth district of South Centoria to arrive at the inn in question.

It was a very large three-story building, explaining how they were able to host so many visitors from the Dark Territory with an inexpensive nightly cost, as listed on a sign at the front entrance. Kirito pulled back the hood of his cloak, gave a brief glance to the red sandstone exterior of the inn, then opened the door without a second thought. A high-pitched bell rang.

"Welcome!" cried an energetic voice.

The owner of the voice, a woman who looked only a little older than Ronie, stood behind a long counter on the other side of the entrance lobby. Her reddish hair was tied up with a dark-green scarf, and she wore an apron of the same color.

As Kirito approached the counter, she smiled and asked, "Are you staying? Party of four?"

"Uhhh," he mumbled at first, then nodded. "Yeah. Four. Just for the one night."

"That can certainly be arranged. Will you be staying in just one room?"

"Yes, same room. Preferably on the second floor."

Ronie assumed that he was going to identify himself and demand her assistance in the investigation, so this initial conversation left her surprised. Within moments, he had rented a room, paid six hundred shia for it, and they were led up to the second floor.

They'd been given a corner room on the southeast side of the building, where much of Solus's light filtered in through large windows. There was a large, round table with a selection of fruit on top, and four beds were lined up in a row along the back wall.

After a detailed explanation of the room's features, the innkeeper bowed deeply and left. Tiese promptly exclaimed, "I've never been in an inn outside of Norlangarth before! The way the room feels and the way the furniture looks are completely different from the north!"

"Tiese, we're not here to have a good time," Ronie scolded her friend, then turned to Kirito. "Um...what are you planning to do now? This isn't the actual room where it happened, is it...?"

"No, I would assume not. But there's a way for us to figure out which room it was. Let's take a break for now, though," Kirito replied, stretching luxuriously.

Asuna took off her cloak and shook out her long hair. "I'll prepare some tea," she added, heading for a cupboard in a corner of the room. Ronie trotted after her to help.

According to the innkeeper's explanation, if they wanted hot water, they should visit the dining room on the first floor and bring it back, but Asuna ignored that, pouring some cold water from the pitcher into the teapot and generating a single heat element with an easy incantation.

Heating up room-temperature water was one of the fundamental lessons of sacred arts, but there was a trick to it. Simply dropping the heat element into the water would cause an immediate reaction on the surface of the water, boiling it away into steam without actually raising the temperature of the remaining water much. There was another step needed to effectively transfer the element's heat into water.

A proper sacred artician would use a valuable reagent from Sothercrois called a firesucker stone to absorb the heat element and then place the stone in the water. You could also just lift the container and hold the heat element below it until the water boiled, but that took time. Ronie watched the swordswoman subdelegate, wondering what she would do. Asuna's first step was to generate two steel elements.

Using steel to form a sphere was a good idea as a replacement for a firesucker stone, but unlike the stones, which instantly absorbed a heat element, a metal sphere did not heat up that easily. And of course, unlike a sacred element, metal balls did not float in the air, so they required a support while heating.

Something convenient like tongs or a spoon would do, but using another tool aside from the medium was considered uncouth. The best use of sacred arts was when its task was completed from element generation to command, without anything extra involved. Many artificers liked to create a tiny whirlwind with a wind element to float the ball, fusing fire with the wind—it looked flashy, too—but triple-element arts were difficult, as was controlling the whirlwind, and any loss of concentration could easily fill a room with flying sparks.

I'd better be ready to neutralize any flames with frost elements, Ronie told herself. Meanwhile, Asuna stilled the heat element with her right hand and controlled the steel elements with her left, bringing them closer to the heat. Just when it seemed as though the two would react, sending hot droplets of metal spraying everywhere, Asuna uttered a command Ronie did not recognize.

“Form Element, Hollow Sphere Shape!”

The two steel elements fused into one, transforming into a sphere about three cens in diameter. As soon as the weightless elements turned into actual steel, gravity pulled the object to splash into the teapot.

“Um...Lady Asuna, where is the heat element...?” Ronie wondered. Looking around, she couldn't spot the element, which should have been somewhere in the air. Asuna prodded her with an elbow and pointed at the ceramic pot.

Ronie leaned over and saw, at the bottom of the water inside, the ball of steel glowing red. Little bubbles formed through the water around it, and steam was beginning to rise from the surface.

“You mean...the heat element is inside that ball?”

“That's right. I made a hollow sphere with the steel elements and trapped the heat element inside.”

“I didn't know you could do that...,” Ronie murmured in amazement. The water in the pot was now bubbling away, nearly at a full boil.

Normally, to create a hollow ball out of steel elements, you had to make a solid one with the Sphere Shape command, then use the Enlarge command while heating it up. But this was difficult to control, would easily break, and couldn't be filled with anything if you actually succeeded.

But if you could create a hollow ball from the start and simply form it around the spot in the air where the heat element was waiting, you could trap it inside. That was safer and more effective than cooking the steel ball over a flaming whirlwind.

“That...That sacred word you used...*Hollow*? Is that something you discovered...?” Ronie asked, marveling at this new idea.

But the subdelegate just shook her head. “No, Alice was an expert at empty spheres, and she taught the command to Ayuha and no one else. It was Ayuha who told me.”

“Lady Alice...” Ronie was again speechless.

In the Otherworld War, Ronie had the chance to speak with the Osmanthus Knight, Alice Synthesis Thirty, on a number of occasions. What was most memorable of all was the night they spent in the tent with Asuna and General Serlut in front of the sleeping Kirito, trading stories. But just as vivid was the memory of Alice’s terrifying wide-ranging light-element attack that fried the Dark Army in an instant during the battle to defend the Eastern Gate.

As someone who could use a few arts of her own, Ronie sometimes wondered what kind of command could produce so much power. It wasn’t something an apprentice knight like herself could know, of course, but she could imagine something like a countless number of light elements being accumulated somehow, then unleashed all at once. If the secret to that art lay in the Hollow Sphere Shape command, then it made sense that she wouldn’t teach it to anyone else but Ayuha.

“Ummm...It wasn’t a bad thing that I overheard it, was it?” she asked hesitantly. Asuna just smiled at her.

“It’s fine. I think Ayuha trusted me...She felt I wouldn’t misuse it. So when the time comes, you can tell that command to someone you trust, too.”

“.....I will.....I will,” Ronie repeated, feeling something hot surging up inside her chest.

Just then, Kirito peered over her shoulder. Very much contrary to the emotion of the moment, he noted, “Man, you’re doing it the slow way...If you want to

boil water, just shoot two or three fire arrows into a basin, and—”

“You do realize that if you do that, the entire room’s going to fill up with steam!” Tiese interrupted. Asuna and Ronie laughed.

They were relaxing and enjoying the red tea, apparently a product of the southern empire, when the two o’clock bells rang outside. The melody was the same as in North Centoria—and even in the Dark Territory, for that matter—but the tone felt lighter and crisper. Before the resonance of the melody had died out, Kirito was already on his feet, looking toward the door.

“Okay. The break period for this inn’s employees is two to two thirty, and all the cleaners gather in the spare room downstairs. The guests should all be out sightseeing and shopping, so there won’t be anyone in the hallway.”

“...How do you know that?” Asuna asked him. Kirito explained that he’d asked during checkin.

Approaching the door, he cracked it open and peered out, then nodded and beckoned them over. It wasn’t clear what he was going to do, which was worrisome, but their only choice was to trust that he wouldn’t do anything *too* crazy indoors.

He walked through the doorway and headed north, away from the stairs, checking each door on the right-hand side as he went. The fourth door featured a piece of parchment paper pinned up that read *Not currently in use*. Above it was a metal plate with the number 211 carved into it.

“This is it,” Kirito murmured. Asuna nodded back. It was the room where Yazen the cleaner had been killed.

The swordsman delegate reached for the brass handle, but he stopped short for some reason. Then he raised his hand up to his face and stared closely at his fingertips.

“...What are you doing, Kirito?” Ronie asked quietly. He mumbled something nondescript but nothing else. Asuna leaned closer to him and whispered, “Don’t worry, I’m sure they don’t model down to unique fingerprints.” He seemed to accept this and grabbed the doorknob this time.

He turned it left and right, but it was locked, of course. What now? Kirito

stared at the keyhole—and a few seconds later, there was a sound of metal clinking and unlocking.

“Oh no...You can do that with Incarnation?” Tiese wondered in half amazement and half annoyance.

Kirito just shrugged. “The keys and locks of this world aren’t actual mechanical devices; they’re system-based...er...I’ll explain it to you one day.”

Tiese did not look satisfied with that vague answer, but given the circumstances, she wasn’t going to bother him any further. Kirito grabbed the knob again, and this time, it turned all the way, opening the door. He peered through, then pushed it wider and motioned for the rest to go through.

After Asuna had entered, Ronie saw that it was a very ordinary two-person room. There was only one window on the eastern wall, with beds on either side, and across from them, a table just a bit smaller than the one they’d been drinking tea around moments ago.

There was nothing immediately out of place about this room. If anything, the only differences were the lack of fresh fruit on the table and the fact that the curtains were closed. But Ronie could feel that this was the scene of a murder by the way her skin crawled.

Kirito was the last to go inside, and he shut the door behind him. Asuna turned back to him from near the table and nodded.

“...You’re sure this is safe, Asuna?” he asked, worried. Ronie felt the same way, and she was sure Tiese did, too.

Ayuha Furia, captain of the sacred artificers brigade, said that the art of past-scrying, discovered just yesterday, was too much strain. As one of the greatest wielders of sacred arts in the world, if she said so, then even Asuna with her godly power would not find it easy to attempt.

But Asuna simply gave him one of her usual gentle smiles and said, “Yes, it’ll be fine. We have to find whoever did this and catch them. It’s what we owe Oroi for keeping him prisoner...and for poor Yazen.”

Her voice was warm but encompassed a core of iron resolve. She took a folded-up piece of hemp paper from the leather bag hanging from her simple

knight's sword belt. It featured many lines of very fine writing in the sacred tongue.

".....All right. Go ahead," Kirito answered briefly, full of trust. He gave the others a signal and backed up against the wall.

Asuna stood in the center of the room, reading the words on the paper in silence for most of a minute, then folded up the paper carefully and returned it to her bag. Apparently, she'd already memorized the words and was just giving it one last refresher.

It was true that when it came to sacred arts, reading them off of a piece of paper and chanting the commands from memory made a huge difference in success rate, precision, and power. Kirito said that was because the power of Incarnation played a part in sacred arts, too. So memorizing a sacred art was always the baseline assumption, but when Asuna started to recite the past-scrying art, Ronie was stunned at how much longer it was than she suspected.

She understood the first step—generating crystal elements to create a thin round disc—but every sacred word after that was new to her and totally indecipherable. But Asuna recited them anyway, her voice lilting and flowing like she was singing.

Suddenly, the room went dark.

"...!"

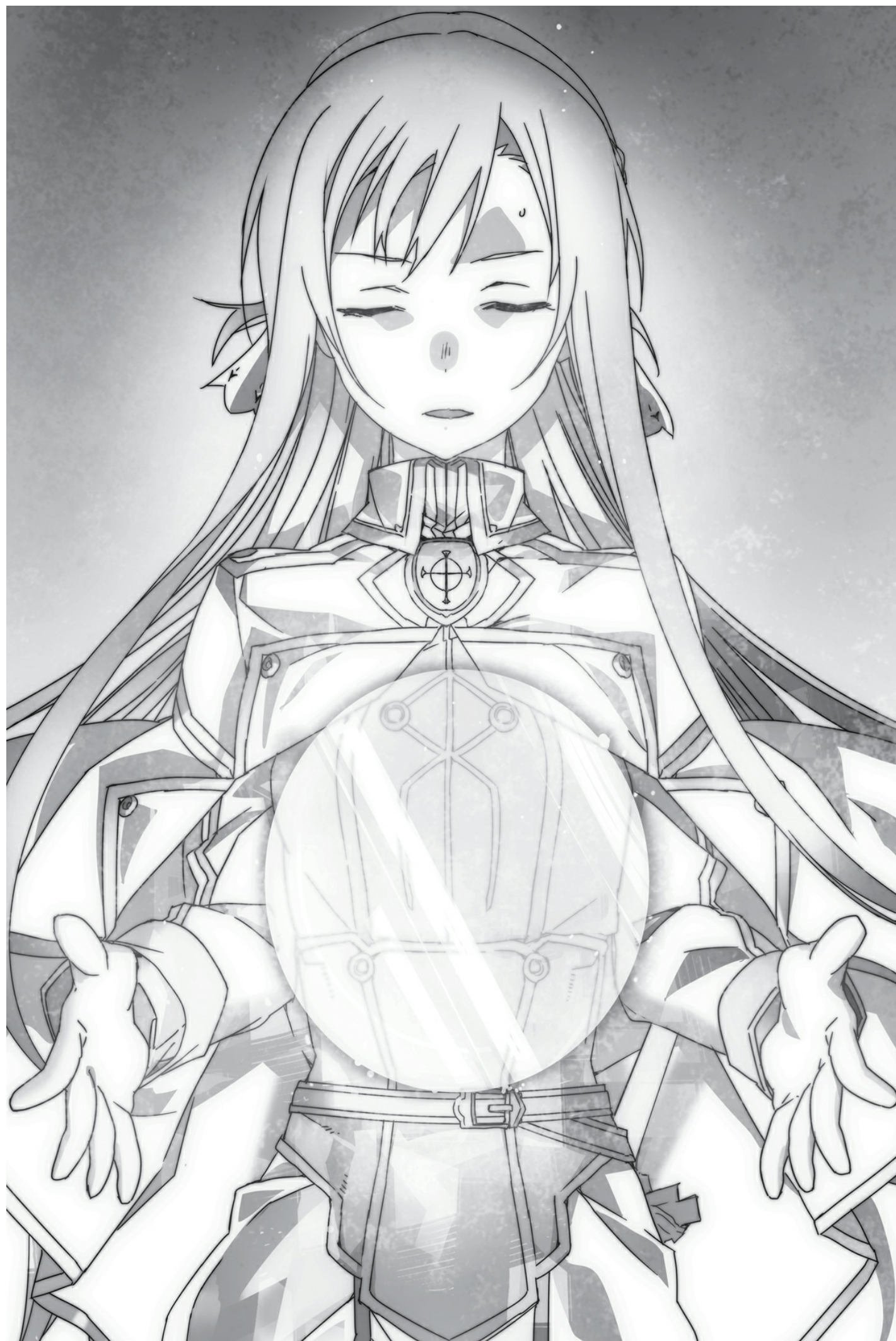
Tiese gasped and grabbed Ronie's sleeve. The darkness was as amorphous as mist, flowing along the ground and chilling their legs where it touched them.

Asuna's voice started to darken, too, and she briefly paused. Her upper body swayed. Kirito moved toward her but paused as well. The recitation resumed, and the darkness grew thicker.

Then the crystal disc resting on the table abruptly floated in silence. An eerie purple light shone out from it, lighting up Asuna's face from below.

Her expression was tense, fighting against pain; it made Ronie bite her lip. She wanted to help, but the formula was only Asuna's to speak. Yet, this was a divine act she was attempting, to see into the past. A secret of secrets that Administrator had created—and locked deep behind the senate's door...

Asuna swayed again and reached for the disc with both hands. With each twitch of her slender fingers, the purple light glowing from the surface flickered unevenly.



Then, out of nowhere, there was a voice, distorted and alien, like it came from underneath the very earth.

"...ou are...eror's priv...serf Yaz...n't you...?"

It was a man's voice—that was all she could tell. Then came another man's voice, this one hesitant and nervous.

"A-ah...no, I'm...not...holding's tena...anym..."

"...ce a serf...ways a serf...If you don't like that, then..." said the first man's voice, suddenly growing clearer and crueler, *"...die right here and now!"*

There was a dull, heavy thud, and the second man screamed.

Then the crystal disc shattered into a million tiny pieces. Asuna started to fall to the floor. As if by teleportation, Kirito was there, his arms extended to grab her before she hit the ground.

The four of them left Room 211, which was lit again, and hurried back to their original room.

Kirito hoisted Asuna up on his shoulder and helped lay her down on one of the beds.

"I-I'm all right," she said hastily, trying to get up, but he pressed down on her shoulders and turned to look at Ronie.

"Can you get her a cup of water?"

"S-sure, right away," she said, hurrying to the cupboard to pour some of the cold water in the pitcher into a glass. Kirito took it from her, lifted Asuna up slightly, and brought the cup to her lips.

After three separate careful sips, the subdelegate looked at Ronie, slightly revitalized, and smiled. "Thank you, Ronie."

"It's nothing..." she murmured, looking down. She felt frustrated that this was the most she could do. Her only course of action was to reassure herself that there *would* be a time where she could be of more help.

Asuna's fatigue was not something caused by the loss of her life value, so sacred arts could not replenish it. Kirito should have known that, but after he

gave Ronie the glass back, he lifted his hand and generated three light elements without a spoken command. He let them float in the air around Asuna; they lit her beautiful face and chestnut-brown hair as her eyes closed.

Once released from Kirito's control, the light elements expended all their meager light in less than a minute, but the faint warmth seemed to give some life back to Asuna. Her eyes opened just after that.

"Yes...I'm fine."

"Don't tell stories. You should be resting," Kirito admonished.

But she shook her head and sat upright. "No, I have to hurry..."

A tense look crossed his face, and Ronie and Tiese shared a glance.

"...What did you see?" he asked. "Could you find out how the killer evaded the Taboo Index to murder Yazen?"

She blinked, holding her eyes shut for a moment to be sure, then whispered hoarsely, "The first thing I saw in the glass disc...was a man cleaning that room. I think it was Yazen. Then, just in the front of the image, a second man said to Yazen, 'You are from the emperor's private holdings, the serf Yazen, aren't you?'"

"The emperor's...private holdings," Kirito repeated in a whisper. She nodded.

"Yes...Yazen started to nod, but then he said, 'No, I'm not the private holding's tenant anymore.' Then the second person was...almost mocking him by saying 'Once a serf, always a serf. If you don't like that, then die right here and now,' and he stabbed Yazen in the chest with a dagger...Yazen fell to the ground, and the man left the room with the dagger. That was as far as I saw..."

She said nothing more, but no one rushed to fill the ensuing silence.

Even the greatest of artificers could not falsify the events of the past, so this made it clear that it was not Oroi who had killed Yazen. That was good to know, but it was undeniable that this also raised more mysteries.

Kirito straightened up from his kneeling position at the side of the bed and looked around the room. "The man who killed Yazen dropped the bloody dagger in the hallway, knocked on a nearby door, and disappeared," he

explained. “Oroi the mountain goblin was sleeping in that room, and he got up and saw the dagger in the hallway and had picked it up to examine it when the Centorian guards spotted him and arrested him. That’s what I think happened after Yazen’s murder.”

That made sense to Ronie, but Tiese had some thoughts on the matter: “But, Kirito, wouldn’t that be too early for any guards to arrive? I would think that from Yazen’s murder to the knock on Oroi’s door to Oroi picking up the dagger, it could only have taken a few minutes at most...”

That was a good point. Kirito frowned and puzzled over it.

“True, true. The guards rushed to the inn after the fourth-district guard station received a civilian report that a demi-human was rampaging with a blade, I believe. But in fact, Oroi had only picked up the knife and wasn’t doing anything with it. Which would mean the report came from the killer or a companion of his...And you couldn’t see the killer at all, Asuna?” he asked.

She shook her head regretfully. “I couldn’t. It was like he was always just behind the view of the glass disc. Or...in fact...” She paused, mouth partly open, as though searching for the right word. Then she sighed. “No...I’m sorry, I can’t really explain it.”

“You don’t have to apologize,” Kirito said quickly, approaching her and gently rubbing her back. “You didn’t see the killer, but you did hear his voice, and we learned some other things, too. Such as...the killer didn’t utilize some complex trick to kill Yazen while evading the Taboo Index’s rules. He just stabbed him right in the heart...”

That was true. Asuna braved danger to use the past-scrying art to find out *how* and *why* the killer attacked Yazen. The “why” part was still unclear, but the “how” was very simple. No tricks, no cleverness—just a stab from a dagger. Meaning...

“The killer isn’t bound by the Taboo Index,” Ronie murmured.

“That’s what it means,” Kirito agreed, his voice dark and heavy. “Though we don’t know how...”

“About that, actually,” Asuna interrupted. The other three looked toward the

bed. The swordswoman subdelegate looked almost entirely recovered now. She stared at them in turn with eyes the color of tea softened by milk. “I think the killer’s words are the reason he killed...he was *able* to kill Yazen.”

“His words...? ‘Once a serf, always a serf’?”

“Yes...What if the reason the killer was able to ignore the Taboo Index is because Yazen came from the lands privately held by a noble, and he was subject to judicial authority...?”

“...Oh!” Kirito inhaled sharply. He stared at the window, as though he was going to see the culprit standing right there. “Then the culprit can kill not just Yazen, but any of the old former serfs we freed...That’s why you said we ought to hurry.”

“Yes...My first thought was that we ought to strike before another person becomes a victim...but...”

Ronie could tell why Asuna was hesitant to continue speaking. She took a step forward, barely conscious of it, and said, “There are nearly a thousand former serfs in the northern empire alone—and four times that in all of the realm...We can’t provide protection or safety for all of them.”

Tiese came forward next to her and gestured with her hands. “Plus, not all the people who were released from servitude stayed in Centoria. Over half left the capital and chose rural places where they could have their own land, I’ve heard. It would take weeks to track them all down...”

“And it’s not like this place has a unified census registry,” muttered Kirito, although that term was unfamiliar to Ronie. Asuna joined him in thinking hard, her brows knit, but after a while, her face shot upward.

“But...the culprit is attempting to start another war between the human and dark realms, so they wouldn’t just be looking for any old former serf to kill. There’s no point in doing it unless they can pin the act on a visitor from the Dark Territory.”

“Meaning we should be protecting...the dark-worlders...?” Tiese asked.

Kirito nodded firmly. “Yes...I was always planning to come to this inn, either today or tomorrow. I was going to invite Oroï’s companions to the cathedral.

It'll probably help ease Oroï's homesickness, too..."

"But there are so many more tourists out there," Ronie added, eliciting a shrug from him.

"That's true. But fortunately, we have their numbers and inn locations all recorded, so they'll be much easier to handle than the former serfs. We can't bring every last one of them to the cathedral, so I think we'll push the schedule a bit and start sending them home as early as today. If we put together armed caravans to take them to the Eastern Gate, I don't think the killers will be able to mess with them."

"Then let's get a move on," said Asuna, slipping her legs over the side of the bed and standing up. Kirito quickly moved to give her support, but she seemed to be fine. She still gave him a smile and a quiet word of thanks, however, before composing herself and getting down to business.

"So...do you know the room where the other three mountain goblins are staying?"

"Of course. It's a four-person room on the first floor, so it's probably right below us. There should be a guard on duty in front of the door—half to guard them, half to keep an eye on them..."

"That's unavoidable. It won't be necessary once they're safely moved to Central Cathedral. Let's get going," Asuna commanded, quickly walking off. The others hurried after her.

But when they descended to the first floor, they found only an empty hallway and a cleaned room. Kirito asked the innkeeper at the counter, and with a surprised expression, she informed them that a carriage had brought an agent of the South Centoria city government to the inn that very morning, and it had taken the three goblins away with it.

Ronie rushed into the dragon stable a full two hours later than usual and was greeted by a slightly disgruntled Tsukigake.

“Kwoooo!”

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry. I know I’m late.”

The moment she opened the one-mel gate, the juvenile dragon covered in downy fur of a pale-yellow hue came rushing out to her, beating her wings. She caught Tsukigake with both arms, and the juvenile dragon pressed her head, rounded horn nubs and all, against the base of Ronie’s neck.

In the adjacent stall, Tiese was receiving a similarly energetic greeting from Shimosaki. For now, the two dragons were still small enough that the girls could just barely lift them, but that wouldn’t be possible a year from now.

“Miss Arabel, may I have a word?”

The voice over her shoulder caused Ronie to jump. She turned around and saw a tall and willowy man. He was wearing an outfit made of a mysterious fabric with scalelike patterning, and the band around his waist supported a number of leather sacks of varying sizes. There was a long wooden handle in his hand like some kind of spear, yet the head was not a metal point but a large brush of tough-looking hair.

His face with sunken cheeks looked a bit older than Deusolbert’s, but his actual age was a mystery. He’d been in charge of the cathedral’s dragon stable for ages, and people said that, like Airy, his life had been frozen through sacred arts.

“Yes? What is it, Mr. Hainag?” asked Ronie. The stablemaster reached out a hand that was thin but wired with firm muscle. He scratched the dragon under her chin.

“Sometimes when I give Tsukigake fish these days, she leaves a little bit behind. Dragons have their own individual tastes, but you can’t choose your food on the battlefield. It’s best to correct that kind of picky eating while they’re young.”

“I...I see. Hey, Tsukigake, you shouldn’t be picky about your food!” she said, lightly scolding the juvenile. Tsukigake seemed to understand Ronie, drooping her feathered ears and crooning.

“How should I fix a dragon that doesn’t like fish?” she asked.

“The most effective way is to catch the fish for her yourself. They’ll usually get over it once they’ve eaten fresh, lively fish, but that’s difficult to do in the cathedral. In the past, I took the juveniles to a lake outside the city with Sir Bercouli’s permission.”

“F-fresh and lively...? Then I’ll ask Commander Fanatio or Kiri...or the swordsman delegate if I can try that.”

“Please do. That’s all.”

With a small bow, Stablemaster Hainag headed farther through the building toward the adult dragons. Nearby, Tiese looked down at her own dragon partner and said, “Do you think they’re able to catch their own fish?”

“I don’t even know if they can swim...”

In the meantime, the two little dragons wagged their tails back and forth, clearly excited about the thought of going outside.

“All right, all right...”

They left the stable and set down the dragons on the grass lawn surrounding the building. The creatures promptly raced around, squawking and cavorting. Watching them brought smiles to the girls’ faces, but it wasn’t enough to get them running around after them. At this very moment, Kirito and Asuna were still talking with the senior knights high up in the cathedral building.

They went to the nearest guard station to ask about the name of the South Centorian official who took the three mountain goblins away in his carriage, but they got no answer. They did find the man who’d been standing guard at the

inn door, and he said that the transfer order the official provided for the goblins had the proper government seal stamped upon it.

Their next step would be to ask the city government directly, but it wouldn't be easy. The upper nobles' influence was still strong among the local governments, and they did not see eye to eye with the Human Unification Council. The South Centorian office in particular had taken a hard line after they were booted from control over Yazen's murder case. With the assumption that an official written order would be necessary to investigate the goblins' transfer, Kirito returned to Central Cathedral to prepare the necessary materials from the council and the Integrity Knighthood.

Fanatio and Deusolbert would not protest an order to investigate the city government. But Kirito was already certain that the transfer order and the official the guards saw were fakes arranged by the culprit. The real problem was what to do after that.

Kirito felt responsible that the goblins had been spirited away from under his nose, and he wouldn't want to leave the search and rescue up to someone else. But the swordsman delegate's life had just been endangered (if indirectly) at Obsidia Palace, so Fanatio and the others would certainly bristle at the suggestion that they should sit back and allow him to do everything.

"...I bet that meeting's a very contentious one...," murmured Tiese, who was clearly thinking about the same thing.

Ronie nodded. "It might have to go into tomorrow."

"Let's hope he doesn't slip out in the middle of the night..."

But that sounded very plausible. Ronie wanted Kirito to be free to do as he pleased, but as his former page, she needed to keep him in line when the situation called for it. She looked up at the chalky-white monument and said, "I'll ask Lady Asuna to keep a close eye on him."

Tiese was about to reply to that, but no words came out, only breath. Ronie looked over and saw her pursing her lips with a searching expression.

"...What?"

"No. Nothing."

The juvenile dragons, upset by the lack of attention they were receiving, chirped at the two in an attempt to get them to chase.

“Fine, fine, but we’re not going to roll in the grass!” Ronie called out as she ran toward Tsukigake and Shimosaki.

The twentieth to thirtieth floors of Central Cathedral were the living quarters of the workers, sacred artificers, and knights.

Kirito and Asuna's room was on the southeast corner of the thirtieth floor. Curiously, it had the same layout as the South Centoria inn room they had rented for six hundred shia, but the size was very different.

Upon opening the heavy door from the hallway, there was a small entrance room with another door that led into a tremendous living room that was nearly ten times its size.

On the south wall were tall lattice windows that ran from floor to ceiling, and on the west wall was a full-size kitchen and bathroom. The east wall was shared with their equally spacious bedroom, which was about half the size of the living area.

Unlike in Japan, the Underworld had no concept of the tatami mat as a measurement of interior space. For one thing, there were no tatami mats at all in North Centoria or the cathedral. The space of the wooden or tile floors was represented only in square mels or square kilors, which were sometimes abbreviated to squamels and squakilors, respectively. By this measurement, the living room was fifty squamels.

The first time she was shown to the room, Asuna's initial thought was that it must be incredibly hard to clean...but in the Underworld, dust and dirt were essentially treated like visual effects, not physical matter, so a bit of swinging away with a broom or duster was all it took to dispel the grime. It was Kirito who noted wryly that the process was more like retouching a digital photo than actual cleaning.

There was another reason cleaning was much easier here, too.

Shockingly, the cathedral—in fact, the entire Underworld—had not a single toilet. The people of this world ate food but did not expel waste.

That characteristic was true of the real-worlders Asuna and Kirito while they were here, too, of course. Though she'd recently gotten used to the concept, she couldn't help but wonder, when feeling stuffed after a big meal, where that food was supposed to be *going*.

Kirito had much more experience in the Underworld than Asuna, and he took it in stride. "Someone at Rath probably figured that simulating bowel movements wasn't necessary for raising an AI," he said. But at the school for the survivors back in the real world, Asuna took a class in human development, and she did not agree with that assessment. In Freud's model of development, young children go through an "anal stage" of growth, where toilet training teaches confidence and autonomy.

She didn't think that not going to the bathroom caused personality problems in the Underworlders, but it did leave her with concerns. Sometimes, Underworlders swore with words like *shit*. What exactly did they think that word represented? She always wanted to ask one of them but never could, and it had been over a year now.

One year, three months, and sixteen days, in fact.

She glanced over at the sheepskin calendar on the wall—this had been in use for many years and wasn't a creation of Kirito's or Asuna's—and keenly felt the speed of time's passage. Just then, she heard the front door of their room opening and closing.

Kirito's black hair was still a bit damp when he entered the living room. Apparently, he'd rushed back from the Great Bath on the ninetieth floor. Before, whoever finished bathing first would wait at the split in the hallway for the other, but when they learned that it caused the other residents who used the bath to stay away to avoid disturbing them, the pair decided to change their pattern and simply return straight to their living quarters.

"Sorry about the wait," Kirito said as he approached. Asuna took the towel off her shoulders to greet him.

"You could at least dry your hair off first," she said, wrapping his head in the

towel and ruffling it with her hands. There were no hair dryers in this world, but a certain amount of time rubbing a surface with a dry cloth would get the moisture out, which made post-bath hair prep easier than in reality.

Kirito let her do it, but he complained, “You’re always so much quicker to get out these days, Asuna...I thought I could catch up to you in the hallway...”

“I’m not taking faster baths, Kirito, *you’re* staying in for too long. You were in there for an entire hour today.”

“What, really?” he said, a moment before the ten o’clock evening bells sonorously tolled. “Whoa, you’re right...I completely missed the nine thirty bells...”

“You weren’t swimming in the tub, were you?” she asked, pulling the towel off.

He rapidly shook his head. “N-no, I wouldn’t do that...when other people are around...”

“Well, I’m not convinced. Here, sit down,” she said, pushing his shoulder toward the large sofa in the middle of the living room. She picked up the brush she’d been using minutes before off the end table and carefully ran it through his dry hair. The brush had an ebony handle with silver inlay, and it was as close to a magic item as this world had—its bristles supposedly came from a kind of dragon that once lived in the eastern empire; not the familiar winged Western-style dragons but an Asian-type dragon with a long, narrow body. A few pulls through one’s hair left it smooth and shiny. The two of them admonished the decadence of the nobility, but this brush had been a present from Commander Fanatio to Asuna for a full year of service as the swordswoman subdelegate on the council, and she’d been using it ever since.

As he sat there and allowed her to brush his hair, Kirito mumbled, “Really need to finish up that clock soon...”

“I agree with you there. It seems like you’ve been testing it out for so long, though...Is it that hard to do?”

“Yeah. You need a ton of very precise gears to run a proper clock, but the gears in this world are found in the winding mechanism of the castle gates and

waterwheel accelerators—things that transmit a lot of force. And they don't work as a clock when you put them together. Given that the time-tolling bells are perfectly precise, it doesn't make sense to build clocks that don't work as well..."

"Ah, I see," Asuna agreed. She added, "But wait...Fanatio told me there was a clock here on the cathedral ages ago, didn't she? That the pontifex turned it into Bercouli's sword. So who built that?"

"My guess is that it was here in the Underworld from the start. Three hundred years ago, the place where Central Cathedral lies was just a little village, where the Rath engineers worked on raising the first generation of artificial fluctlights. I think they probably placed it there as a kind of monument."

"The First Four," she murmured, recalling what Rath's chief officer Seijirou Kikuoka had said back on the *Ocean Turtle*.

Although she'd just finished brushing his hair, Kirito then ran his hand through it. "If only the console on the hundredth floor worked...Then I could summon the object data for the clock and replicate it all I want," he grumbled. It seemed like a very optimistic wish.

"If you could do that," she pointed out, "you wouldn't need to make physical clocks at all. You could just add a time readout to the menu, your Stacia Window. And more importantly..."

...you might be able to end the maximum acceleration phase, she thought.

The Underworld was currently operating at a stunning speed of five million times that of the real world. Though it was hard to believe, the entire year and three months that Asuna had spent in the Underworld only lasted a miniscule eight seconds of actual time. It was too frightening for her to think about the amount of data her real fluctlight must be exchanging with the STL. It was all too easy for her to imagine her physical brain simply frying itself out.

But even if the system console came back now and allowed them the option of logging out, Asuna couldn't honestly say she knew if she would leap at the chance to do so.

Kirito and Asuna had placed themselves firmly within the governing system of

the entire Underworld and brought vast and speedy change with them. She didn't regret that, but the aftershocks of that revolution still continued, and the murder five days ago was likely a part of that. They had a responsibility to see their changes through. If they were to abandon that and peered back into the Underworld after logging out only to find that civilization had collapsed without them, she would be heartbroken.

Kirito seemed to sense her internal conflict and reached behind his head with both hands to grab Asuna around the middle, then flipped her over until she was sitting on his lap.

"Ah!" she gasped, then recovered and protested at being treated like a stuffed animal. "That was dangerous!"

Though she couldn't see him, she could sense that he was grinning. "You're fine. I had you supported with Incarnation."

"That's not the point! Gosh, it really is true that having mental powers really corrupts people..."

"Corrupts? That seems mean," Kirito said. He put his arms around her from behind and squeezed gently.

Instantly, she felt all the tension go out of her. Every single day of their newlywed life in Aincrad, which felt like the distant past now—events of a previous life, even—she'd sat on his lap like this, nestled in his arms. Sometimes she even fell asleep that way.

A long, long time had passed since then, but when he held her like this, she still felt that same sense of blissful security, that nothing could ever harm her. She leaned against Kirito's chest, still clutching the dragon-hair brush, and closed her eyes.

She wanted to fall right to sleep, to have Kirito carry her to the bed himself... but she couldn't do that. If she fell asleep here, the ever-restless swordsman delegate would sneak out of the cathedral on his own to search for the missing trio of mountain goblins.

At the impromptu meeting this afternoon, the Unification Council and Integrity Knighthood sent orders to investigate the South Centoria city

government, but the five o'clock bells had already rung, so it wouldn't go into effect until the following morning. And the official who appeared at the inn was probably an impostor, so an investigation of the city office would probably come back with a simple answer: "We didn't order any transfer of goblins, and that official does not exist." Asuna thought giving the nimble assassins an entire day of a head start was a bad move. But even Kirito wasn't going to find the goblins by searching all over the vast city, and it was possible that, like at Obsidia, this was a trap designed to lure the delegate into a vulnerable position.

Most importantly, Ronie the apprentice knight had asked Asuna to keep an eye on Kirito, and she had said she would. That was an agreement she had to uphold.

The vision of Ronie's expression, serious with concern for Kirito's safety, prickled at Asuna's heart. She knew how the younger girl felt about Kirito for a while now—before the Unification Council started, in the midst of the Otherworld War, on the night that they traded stories with Alice and General Sortiliena. But in all the time since then, Asuna had been unable to talk about it with Ronie.

She knew the seventeen-year-old was grappling with feelings that had nowhere else to go, and it hurt Asuna as well. But she didn't know what to do about it, either.

There were times in the real world when she'd felt miserable like this, too. Friends she'd met in fictitious worlds, but with bonds that were nothing short of real...Lisbeth, Silica, Sinon, and Leafa. They also had powerful feelings for Kirito, but they kept them suppressed around her or laughed them off as jokes. In fact, whenever possible, they rooted for Asuna and cheered her on in her relationship.

She always found that heartening but also painful. In fact, she even found Kirito's ability to stand in the midst of such a treacherous web of attention without giving clear answers to be worthy of envy.

But Kirito had been like that since the very first time she met him, in the labyrinth of the first floor of Aincrad. He extended his arms as wide as they could go to accept everything and never gave up on anything himself. It was

because of that personality that he'd saved Asuna when he'd found her on the top level of the labyrinth, leveling up in a self-destructive haze that left her unconscious. On the boss battle of that floor, he had sacrificed his own reputation to focus all the hatred players felt toward the beta testers onto himself, choosing to take on the mantle of beater: someone who was both crucial to forward progress in the game but also despised by many.

And that was the Kirito that Asuna had fallen in love with.

So being locked inside this world with Kirito gave her a small measure of relief.

At the end of the Otherworld War, after she helped Alice the Integrity Knight escape into the real world, Asuna stayed behind, solely because she couldn't possibly leave Kirito behind by himself. Actually, that thought only occurred to her retroactively; at the time, she never even considered just logging out with Alice. It wasn't out of any wish to monopolize Kirito, and after a year of time in here, her sense of remorse toward the friends and family she was increasingly unlikely to ever see again just grew stronger.

But even then, there was a part of her that consistently thought that, at least in this world, she wouldn't have to be trapped between her feelings of guilt toward Lisbeth and the other girls and her own romance.

Asuna set down the brush on her knees and enveloped Kirito's hands where they circled her body. The pressure squeezing her grew just a bit stronger.

When they were reunited at the World's End Altar at the very southern tip of the Dark Territory, Kirito fell to the white-stone ground and cried without end. She didn't need to ask to know that he was weeping for the people he would never see again.

Much time had passed since then, and it was very rare that they spoke of memories of the real world—or their friends and family that they were eternally isolated from. There were too many things to do and think about in this world, for one, but Asuna also hadn't fully processed all the feelings she had, either. Perhaps the same was true for Kirito.

Given the situation, she wanted to be perfectly truthful and fair to Ronie. She didn't want to repeat what she had done in the real world. She wanted to think

about what she could do for the girl and what was best—and yet...

“...Shall we go to bed now?” Asuna whispered. Right behind her ear, Kirito said, “Sounds good.”

She was about to slide off his lap when he slipped his right hand under her knees and lifted her up bridal-style.

“Wha—? Hey...”

She squirmed in surprise, and it caused the dragon-hair brush on her lap to slip. But it stopped in midair, fifty centimeters off the ground, then slid sideways to rest atop the low table. He’d used his Incarnate Arms to catch the precious brush.

Asuna had spent a lot of time practicing that psychic power that only Kirito and the elite knights could wield, but the best she could do for now was budge a ten-shia copper coin a little. She was frightened at the thought of how lazy she might get if she could freely move common objects around. As it was, she only got to do a little cooking and cleaning of her room for household chores.

“You startled me,” she murmured, looking at Kirito. He gave her a mischievous grin back.

“I overworked you with that past-scrying today, so I can afford to pamper you a little.”

“That was nothing, I told you,” she protested as Kirito glided across the living room, opening the bedroom door with another bit of magic.

In the center of the room, which was nearly twice as big as Asuna’s bedroom in real life, was a bed that was another size larger than a king bed. The first time Fanatio showed her this room, she had said *Now this is really too much*, but the woman just smiled and cheerily informed her that the bed had been brought in when they were building the thirtieth floor of the cathedral, and it couldn’t be removed from the room without destroying it. And on top of that, the heavy single-piece black walnut headboard was so fine that Asuna’s latent streak of natural wood furniture appreciation wouldn’t allow her to refuse it.

According to Takeru Higa of Rath, the Underworld took object and terrain data generated with the Seed program and converted it to the ultra-realistic mnemonic visual format. And the Seed was just a compact version of the

Cardinal System that ran *SAO*, so in a sense, the walnut trees growing in the Underworld had the same digital DNA as the ones in Aincrad.

Kirito laid Asuna down gently on the right side of the bed, then circled around the footboard to sit on the left side. He cast glances at the two light-element lamps on the walls, extinguishing the elements within them. When the man-made light was gone, only the pale moonlight coming through the large window on Asuna's left illuminated the room.

Then he picked up the blanket folded at their feet and pulled it up to Asuna's chin. Once she was tucked in like a little child, he patted her lightly and went to lie down beside her.

"...You'd better not sneak away after I fall asleep," she murmured, feeling the sleepiness roll over her. She could feel him grimacing in the dark.

"I won't. I know there's no way to find a couple goblins in a city the size of Centoria without a lead..."



“It’s all right; I’m sure we’ll find them safe and sound. I’m sure the culprits need to plan...before their next...move.....”

Asuna resisted the sinking feeling of sleep claiming her body and shifted her right hand closer to Kirito. His warm, large hand searched out hers and enveloped it gently.

Lately, when they were alone, she sought comfort from him like a little child. It wasn’t intentional—it just happened for some reason.

Perhaps the reason had to do with the fact that their ages had inverted.

Asuna’s birthday was September 30th, 2007. Kirito’s birthday was October 7th, 2008. Asuna was always one year older than him, but Kirito had already spent two years and eight months in the time-accelerated world of the simulation before Asuna dived in. He’d spent half a year of that time in an unconscious stupor, but even if you subtracted six months, Kirito’s mental age was now a year and two months older than hers.

Though she almost never thought about this during the normal course of events, there were times when they were alone when little things about his mannerisms and speech felt older and more mature to her in a way she had never felt in Aincrad, and it caused her heart to skip a beat. Perhaps that feeling was accumulating within her and turning her more childlike in turn.

Looking back, when she’d met Kirito in Aincrad, he’d been a kid in middle school who’d just turned fourteen. Asuna had been in her third year of middle school, with high school entrance exams just ahead of her. Circumstances had brought them together into a partnership, and they’d had many immature arguments along the way.

Such fond memories, which seemed either like recent events or the long-distant past, gently guided Asuna into a deep and gentle sleep.

With each passing day, the north wind grew balmier, softly stirring the surface of the blue lake water. Solus's light reflected off the ripples, transforming into complex and tiny flickers of color.

Nestled among the smooth hills outside North Centoria, Lake Norkia's ice had just melted half a month ago, but there was already new grass sprouting along the shore, and tiny yellow flowers added some meager color to go with it.

This region was the richest in earthly fertility near the capital and offered beautiful sights in each of the four seasons, but it had been a long time—over a hundred years, in fact—since any commoners or lower nobles were even allowed near it. That was because the shores of Lake Norkia had always been part of the largest of the private lands owned by nobles: the imperial private holdings.

After the Rebellion of the Four Empires, all the private lands had been opened up, and now they were considered free land that anyone could walk across to enjoy. But with the full bloom of spring still distant, there were no other figures at the waterside except Ronie, Tiese, and their two dragons.

By the calendar of the Human Era, it was the year 382, February 24th.

The girls concluded their training session during the morning, and with the permission of their teachers, as well as that of Deusolbert, Commander Fanatio, and even the swordsman delegate, they took Tsukigake and Shimosaki out of the cathedral grounds. Kirito was disappointed that he couldn't join them, a feeling Ronie shared, but this was not a trip for fun. They were going to test out what Stablemaster Hainag had suggested yesterday.

As Solus reached its zenith, the two juvenile dragons frolicking in the grass stopped what they were doing and trotted over to Ronie and Tiese, who were sitting on the rocks at the lakeside, and took turns trilling at them. After all their

running, they were hungry.

Just in case, they packed a bit of dried meat and fruit for the dragons' lunch on the small carriage that Tiese had nominated herself to drive here, if a bit awkwardly. But Ronie did not pull out the jerky for them.

"Tsukigake, Shimosaki, you're going to catch your own lunch today."

"Kyuru...?"

It wasn't clear how much the dragons understood human speech. They craned their necks with curiosity and skepticism, which prompted Tiese to chuckle and get up off the rock.

"Here, follow me!" she said, crossing the short new grass to the water's edge. Tsukigake and Shimosaki chased after her, their little tails wagging. Ronie quietly snuck along behind them.

Tiese came to a stop along the lake edge where white rock was exposed and peered down into the water.

"Ooh, there they are," she murmured. Ronie came up next to her and saw many shapes swimming speedily through the clear water. It was a school of fish that had passed the winter beneath the ice. The dragons crouched and stuck their long necks between the two girls.

"Look, Tsukigake, those are fish. I bet they're really yummy," she whispered to the picky dragon, who looked up at her and trilled skeptically. When she tried to wriggle away backward, Ronie reached down to steady her rump with a hand and added, "If you don't catch some fish today, you're not getting any lunch."

"Krruu...", Tsukigake whined, as if to say *That's not fair!* It was so comical that Ronie wanted to laugh, but this was too important. She scowled, determined to play the stern master.

While Ronie and her dragon stared each other down, Shimosaki let out a high-pitched cry, beat his wings a few times for good measure, and then leaped out over the water. He folded his wings in the air, straightened out his neck, and plunged headfirst into the lake.

The fish swimming near the bottom of the seventy-cen-deep water split in all

directions. Shimosaki pursued one of them fiercely, twisting and twirling with an impressive underwater agility.

Though dragons' bodies were specialized for flight, the natural dragon nest in the remote stretches of the western empire was found in a treacherous mountain area surrounded by a vast lake dozens of times as large as Lake Norkia. There, the wild dragons swam freely, catching fish. Tsukigake and Shimosaki, who were born at the cathedral, had only swam in the shallow pond within its walls, but they knew how to do it by instinct.

Nearly a minute later, Shimosaki burst up out of the water, beating his little wings furiously until he landed back on the shore. Before Tiese and Ronie could get out of the way, he shook himself vigorously, spraying a carpet of water from his soaking-wet down.

"Aaaah!" Ronie cried, turning her face away. She noticed something shining in Shimosaki's mouth and looked closer. It was a trout, silver with little red flecks. While the fish had looked small at the bottom of the water, up close she could see that it was nearly twenty cens in length.

Tsukigake leaned closer to sniff at the trout flailing and flapping in her partner's jaw. But then the successful hunter tilted his head backward and swallowed the fish whole.

"*Kyurrrr!*" chirped the satisfied little dragon.

Tiese just shook her head. "You went through the trouble of catching it; why not savor the flavor a little more?"

But Shimosaki just wagged his tail and jumped back into the water, as if saying this was just for starters. Tsukigake looked at the surface of the water but stopped there.

"C'mon, Tsuki, you can do it!" coaxed Ronie. The dragon bobbed her body several times, trapped between hunger and hesitation. Finally, she cried "*Krruu!*" and leaped into the water.

The pale-yellow figure was a bit more awkward in the lake than Shimosaki, but she was trying her best. The school of trout was quick and slippery, however, darting left and right to evade. Tsukigake was more reserved and

quiet than her partner, and Ronie was starting to wonder if sending her to catch fish right away was too high a hurdle when Shimosaki suddenly turned to head off the school of trout. The fish stopped in their tracks and panicked, and that was when Tsukigake burst through the group.

The juvenile dragon shot out of the water and returned to shore, now carrying a majestic, twenty-five-cent trout in her mouth.

“*Krrrrrr!*” she trilled, proudly showing off her prize.

Ronie cried out, “You did it! Well done, Tsukigake!”

She gave the dragon a burst of applause, but this was the easy part. Tsukigake was leaving fish behind at the stable, so would she actually eat the trout she caught? Stablemaster Hainag had claimed that eating a fresh fish would fix being picky, but was it true?

Ronie watched her dragon nervously. Tsukigake blinked a few times, thinking it over, then stretched her neck toward her master and dropped the trout onto the grass. “*Krr!*”

The dragon didn’t mean to be stubborn, but Ronie couldn’t help sighing. She enjoyed catching fish but still didn’t like to eat them, then. Ronie was going to scold her, to say that she wasn’t going to get any lunch if she didn’t eat—when Tiese interrupted.

“Don’t you think she’s giving *you* the fish, Ronie?”

“Huh...?” She blinked, then asked the little dragon, “Is that fish for me?”

Tsukigake cried “*Krrrr!*” as if pleased to finally be understood.

“Oh...thank you, Tsuki,” she said, reaching out to caress her head, dotted with water droplets. She picked up the flapping, jumping fish with her other hand and smiled. “I’ll make this my lunch. But you have to eat the next one yourself.”

“*Krr!*” she chirped, jumping back into the water.

From there, the dragons’ improvement was undeniable. Rather than chasing the trout individually, they set one after the school, while the other came from the other direction. When the fish panicked, trapped between two predators, each dragon was able to catch their own prey.

Before the fish finally swam for deeper waters to get away, Tsukigake and Shimosaki had caught five fish each. They ate three of their catches and gave the other two to the girls. The humans seared the trout over a little campfire of dried branches; it was very simple compared to yesterday's fantastic paper-cooked dish from the subdelegate, but because the fish was so fresh, and the dragons had caught them just for the meal, it seemed just as tasty.

As the stablemaster had said, this seemed to cure Tsukigake's picky tendencies, while Shimosaki didn't seem to have any problems to begin with. When they were done eating, the young dragons began to frolic around the knoll again. The yards in the cathedral were spacious, but the dragons clearly enjoyed being in the openness of nature more.

Ronie breathed in the fresh air, telling herself that she'd have to bring Tsukigake here more often.

On a nearby hill, the horses were calmly grazing where they stood tied to the trees. About ten white waterfowl formed a small flock farther out on the lake, while newly emerged butterflies fluttered from flower to flower. Still, there were no other people aside from the two apprentice knights.

"After we opened up the private lands, you'd think more people from the city would come out here to visit," Ronie murmured.

Tiese paused drinking tea from her canteen to snort. "Oh, Ronie, you're too used to living at the cathedral now. It's not the day of rest today, so people aren't going to just get up and leave the city in the middle of the day."

"Oh...r-right."

The children would be learning at school, and the adults would be busy with work or chores at this hour. As apprentices, once they were done with their morning training, the knights had much more freedom with their daily schedule. *I need to remember not to take that for granted*, she told herself.

"Oh, but from what I heard," Tiese continued abruptly, "nobody comes out to the emperor's holdings, even on rest days. Even though the other private estates are so popular there are lines at the gates."

"Ohhh...", Ronie murmured. She glanced around them again.

Norlangarth spread outward from Centoria like a fan. So the closer you were to the capital, the narrower the breadth of the land. This spot was only ten kilors out from the city, and the Everlasting Walls, which split the empires, were still clearly visible to both the east and west.

The emperor's private holdings spanned all the land on the west side of the main road leading north out of Centoria, while the other noble lands were lined up along the east side. In other words, the imperial holdings weren't necessarily farther away, so that wasn't a reason to deter visitors.

Ronie looked at her friend and saw that Tiese's nostrils were twitching just slightly—the look she got when she really wanted to say something. Despite her foreboding, Ronie went ahead and asked the question Tiese was clearly hoping to hear.

“...Why aren't the emperor's holdings more popular?”

Tiese cleared her throat theatrically and pointed at the far bank of Lake Norkia. “See that mansion on the other side?”

“...Yes.” Ronie nodded.

There was a bit of a forest along the far shore, with a black building spire jutting out of the middle of it. That was less of a mansion than a castle manor; it was where the emperors of Norlangarth would stay when visiting their private land. Before the rebellion, there were always about twenty soldiers and servants in residence, but now the building was entirely off-limits, and the whole lot was chained off to prevent visitors from going in.

“The emperor's mansion, right? What about it?” she asked, seeing that Tiese's expression had clouded over into something more ominous.

“...I hear you see things there.”

“See things? ...Like what?”

“You know what I mean,” Tiese murmured, leaning closer to Ronie's ear. “Ghosts.”

“.....”

Ronie wasn't really sure how to react to this at first. She said nothing for

several seconds before finally asking, “Whose?”

Tiese’s overly serious face finally cracked. She shouted, “Aw, come on, you’re no fun! You’re supposed to get all scared!”

“Let me guess: You were preparing yourself to say that all day.”

“Of course I was! I don’t get many opportunities to spook you, Ronie,” complained Tiese.

Ronie poked her near the elbow and asked, “That’s not just a story you made up, is it? Where’d you hear about that?”

“The last day of rest...when you and Kirito were in the dark lands, I went shopping in the market in the sixth district, and the man at the bakery told me. He said that people like to go out to visit the formerly private lands now, so his hard rolls for packed lunches are selling well, but the emperor’s holdings aren’t a popular destination, and it’s because there are ghosts near the mansion, apparently.”

“Really? They believe in ghosts now...?” Ronie wondered, shaking her head.

According to the old stories she’d heard in childhood, there were ghosts wreaking havoc around the various towns and villages before the Axiom Church started. But they were all exorcised by the Church’s bishops and the Integrity Knights, and now the land was at peace, all the tales said. In all her life, Ronie had never seen anything like the spooky ghosts from the stories.

“For one thing, the actual fighting happened at the palace in the first district, and the only people who died were the emperor for not surrendering, the noble generals, and the grand chamberlain of the palace, right? Why would there be ghosts around the mansion in the holdings outside of the city?” she said, a bit faster than necessary. It surprised Tiese, who recovered and gave a small smirk.

“Wait a minute, Ronie. Are you getting a little intimidated?”

“M-me...? No, of course not!”

“Oh really? Well then...why don’t we go and check it out?”

“Huh?” She leaned away, taken aback by the suggestion. “Ch-check out...the mansion?”

“Of course,” said Tiese smugly, arching her back. “Look, if these creepy rumors are going to continue spreading, it’s going to have an effect on the Unification Council’s plans to reuse the private land, right? Apprentices or not, we’re Integrity Knights, so if we realize that something needs to be investigated, shouldn’t we be the ones to do it?”

This is verrry suspicious, Ronie thought, but on the surface, at least, her friend was correct. Instructor Deusolbert often told them that they were now knights, and they couldn’t just stand there waiting for orders all the time. Her entire afternoon was scheduled for hanging out at the lake to fix Tsukigake’s eating habits, and it was still early.

She stopped herself from sighing and looked from her friend to the southern sky. From this angle, Centoria was hidden from view by a hill, but even ten kilors away, Central Cathedral’s majestic pillar stood bright against the blue sky. Kirito and Asuna were probably in there at this very moment, waiting impatiently for the report from South Centoria’s city office. The plan was to receive the results of that investigation, which was likely to be fruitless, and then hold a massive search of the entirety of South Centoria. But if an emergency arose before Ronie and Tiese returned, the elite knight Renly was supposed to ride here on his dragon mount Kazenui and alert them.

“...All right,” Ronie said in as placid a tone as she could manage. She glanced at the dragons, who were running energetically around a nearby field. “But what about them?”

“Why don’t we take them along? Ghosts should be afraid of a sacred animal like a dragon, right? Assuming there’s actually one there.”

It was hard to tell just how seriously Tiese believed in this, but seeing that she wouldn’t relent, Ronie gave in. Only the Integrity Knights could enter a mansion locked up by order of the Axiom Church, and there weren’t going to be dangerous creatures like bears or wolves here, much less any ghosts. So it would be safe to bring the juveniles along.

“I suppose you’re right...”

“Then that settles it!” Tiese shouted, bolting upright from the rock she was using as a chair.

Ronie stood up, too. She brushed the hilt of the Moonbeam Sword hanging at her left side and said, “If it was going to come to this, you should have chosen a new sword for yourself, too.”

Her friend looked at the standard-issue Human Guardian Army sword she had and shrugged. “Mmm, I guess so, but I like this sword...It’s so familiar to me now...”

That was understandable. Ronie felt uneasy about changing to a sword that felt unfamiliar, and it was difficult to let go of an old one. She couldn’t force her friend to change.

Tiese gave her a small grin and then turned toward the dragons. “Shimosaki! Tsukigake! Come over here! We’re going to go on a little trip!”

The diminutive dragons, bursting with energy after gorging themselves on fresh fish, beat their little wings and trilled in unison.

To go from the east shore of Lake Norkia to the west, where the off-limits mansion was, they had to circle either north or south quite a ways.

The south end of the lake was a wetland, so they chose to go north instead. The ground here was dry grassland, which made it easier to walk on. Still, that meant nearly three kilors to walk around the vast lake. They were worried about the dragons’ stamina, but the creatures with the highest natural life value in the realm were perfectly fine trotting along on the hike.

After fifteen or so minutes, they reached the northern tip of the lake, where there was a river feeding into it, spanned by a firm stone footbridge. The river was a tributary of the Rul River, which started at the End Mountains on the northern edge of Norlangarth. The main part of the river followed the highway right into Centoria, where it filled the city’s aqueduct with crystal-clear water.

According to Kirito and Eugeo during their academy days, the source of the Rul was very close to Rulid Village, where they lived. When Tiese had suggested, *Why didn’t you just build a little boat and ride it all the way down to Centoria?* the two of them were very quiet for a long time, then admitted, “We never thought of that.”

Realistically, there would be shallows and rapids and probably a few falls

along the way, so it wouldn't be an easy trip, but Kirito and Eugeo had agreed that whenever they went back to visit Rulid, they should use this method to return to the capital. Tiese and Ronie dreamed excitedly of making that trip with them, but that was an adventure that would never happen.

They hopped from the grassy hill onto the impressive stone path and crossed the bridge. This route would take them directly to the mansion. After a while, a very large field appeared on the right. There were lines and lines of neatly arranged shrubs—probably the grape plants for making wine.

Ronie's father, a lower noble, had said that if the vineyards in the emperor's and high nobles' private lands were converted over to wheat, they could provide the yearly demand of wheat for all of North Centoria, without having to ship it all down from the grain-producing lands to the north. Now that she could see their size for herself, Ronie realized he was not exaggerating.

And the emperor's wine was chosen from only the very finest of the grapes grown on this vast number of vines, with no extra produced that the common people might actually taste. According to Hana, who had been Administrator's personal chef, her master did not particularly fixate on fine food, so she was satisfied with the wines carried by the shops in the capital—which were still very fine, to be fair. But the emperor of Norlangarth was secretly proud that the wine he drank was finer than the pontifex's.

"...I wonder what will happen to these vineyards?" Tiese murmured as they walked past them. Ronie considered this with a tilt of her head.

"The project to reuse the private holdings still hasn't decided whether to leave them as vineyards or convert them to wheat fields. From what I hear, some of the serfs who lived on the land and managed the trees still want to come back and continue growing grapes."

"But with this much space, you'd need a lot of people to manage it...I've heard that similar problems are happening on the private holdings of the other empires, too."

"Yazen lived on the Sothercrois holdings. I wonder what his preference was?" Ronie questioned this time.

Tiese gave it some thought and said, "According to what Lady Asuna saw in

the past-scrying art, Yazen said something like ‘I’m not a serf anymore,’ so I’m guessing he didn’t want to go back.”

“I see...that makes sense. He’d just found a new calling for himself...”

They were silent after that, walking in the warm, soft sunlight. The breeze through the abandoned vineyard ruffled the feathers of the juvenile dragons, who walked a bit ahead of the girls. The gnarled grape vines had lost all their leaves, but they would soon be sprouting bright, new green growths from every possible branch. In order to keep the vineyard functional, they would need people to start pruning the thousands of vines when that time came.

“Listen, Tiese...if there aren’t enough people to do the work...,” murmured Ronie in a daze. But she didn’t finish that thought, and when Tiese pressed her for more information with a look, she only said, “N-nothing, never mind.”

As a matter of fact, she was going to suggest, *What if we move all the goblins who are suffering in the distant reaches of the Dark Territory and give them work tending to these plants?*

But that would only mean replacing the serfs who’d been forced into a painful livelihood in this place with goblins, instead. It wouldn’t be forced servitude this time, of course, and there would be income that matched the amount of work involved, but in the sense that it would be bringing them here to do hard labor, it was hard not to see this as a kind of slavery.

In that case, however...

The vast majority of people in the human realm were forced to start a calling at just ten years old—and begin to work. Children who got to go to a higher school, like Ronie and Tiese, were the exception, and even for them, if they hadn’t become apprentice Integrity Knights, their only options would have been to join the army or marry someone their parents decided upon and be homemakers.

If they couldn’t choose their own future, how was that fundamentally any different from the former serfs?

Ronie came to a stop, so befuddled was she by these new questions she’d never considered before. Just then, Tiese called out, “Oh, look! I see the gate!”

She looked up with a start and saw where Tiese was pointing, farther down the path. There was a majestic iron gate that loomed tall and dark. Beyond it was a line of lush, ancient trees that absorbed the light of Solus, leaving the path beneath them darkened.

They crossed the last hundred mels quickly and stopped before the gate. In the center of the thin metal filigree was an enormous crest of Norlangarth: a symbol of a lily and a hawk. Beneath it was a wooden placard carved with the symbol of the Axiom Church. It had a simple message: ENTRY PROHIBITED WITHOUT PERMISSION OF THE HUMAN UNIFICATION COUNCIL.

On top of that, the double gates were locked by very tough-looking chains that extended off to the left and right, apparently around the entire forest lot. You could simply jump over the chains anywhere aside from the gate, of course, but nobody in this entire realm would attempt to do that after seeing the placard.

At their feet, Tsukigake and Shimosaki looked up at the ostentatious chains and snorted. Their masters looked at each other for a while, until Tiese finally said, “We *are* members of the council, right? Technically speaking?”

“...We go to the meetings every day. I think that counts?” Ronie replied, but it was really more like they *observed* the meetings than *attended* them. Still, there were times when they were given the right to speak, so they clearly weren’t total outsiders to the process.

Tiese bobbed her head. Then she made a stern face, lifted her right fist to her chest, and put her left hand on her sword hilt. “Integrity Knight Apprentice Ronie Arabel! In the name of the Human Unification Council, I permit you to pass through this gate!”

Ronie was taken aback at first, but she recovered to return the knight’s salute in acknowledgment. When Tiese lowered her hands, she said “Okay, my turn,” so Ronie repeated the formal process.

They gave the dragons permission as well, just in case, then walked about ten mels to the right, where the chain was only held up by metal supports, and they could slip through.

Instantly, the air felt colder, causing Ronie to hunch her neck. She told herself

it was because they'd walked into the shade, but there was an oppressive heaviness to the air here that went beyond that simple explanation.

They walked beneath the mossy trees back to the stone path, where Ronie confirmed the point of their impromptu mission with her partner.

"Um, Tiese, we're here to investigate the rumors of ghosts...right?"

"That's right."

"And that means we have to go inside?"

"That's right," Tiese repeated. She smirked. "Uh-oh, Ronie. Are you scared of ghosts?"

Well, now she certainly couldn't admit it. Despite the scary stories she heard as a child threatening to come back to her mind, she said breezily, "Of course I'm not...And besides, there aren't going to be any ghosts in this day and age."

For some reason, Tiese's smirk faded, but she recovered and patted Ronie on the back. "Then going inside the mansion shouldn't be a problem for you! C'mon, let's move!"

"F-fine, fine..."

She knew that she was passively allowing herself to be pushed onward, but Ronie went ahead with it anyway.

Over half a year had passed since this entire forest was chained off, but the ground beneath the trees was surprisingly well kept. Perhaps because the tall trees overhead were taking all of Solus's and Terraria's blessings, the ground weeds couldn't grow underneath. That would explain why the air felt so fresh and alive on the other side of the lake but so gloomy and stifling here.

Tsukigake and Shimosaki had been quite happy to proceed ahead of the girls outside of the gates, but now they were trailing behind. Ronie looked over her shoulder and saw that the dragons were sniffing skeptically at the sides of the road, waving their raised tails back and forth.

"What's wrong, Tsuki?" she called out. The dragon crooned quietly back to her. She seemed hesitant to go on, but she wasn't stopping, either.

Dragons connected to their knights by a powerful bond were said to sacrifice

their lives to protect their masters when the situation required it. As a matter of fact, at the end of the Otherworld War, Ronie had seen Kazenui swoop in to block the long spears wielded by the red knights from the real world in order to save its master, Renly.

The war was over, so even when fully grown, these dragons shouldn't ever come across that situation. Even still, Ronie was briefly paralyzed by that terrible thought.

This trip was for the dragons' benefit, so if the dragons were uneasy about it, there was no need to bother with the mansion. So she thought, but Tiese was not stopping. Ronie turned to face forward again and jogged to keep up with her partner.

Looking back on it, Tiese's attitude felt like it wasn't quite in keeping with her usual character. Her idea to investigate the mansion was delivered in a joking manner but in a strangely insistent way, and it came out of nowhere, too. Almost as if she was planning this sojourn as soon as their trip to the lake was set in stone...

"Hey...", she said to her friend, right at the moment that the sound of the two o'clock bells came echoing from the distant south.

Tiese's head swiveled. "We should hurry, before it gets dark. Let's run!"

"O...okay," Ronie agreed, without much choice in the matter, trotting after Tiese. The little dragons beat their wings and hopped along to keep up. Even for dragons, the juveniles would soon get tired and begin to lose life, so they'd have to pick a moment to stop and feed them some of the dried fruit they brought from the carriage.

The forest around the mansion didn't seem that deep from a distance, but the path twisted and turned, so they never seemed to get through it. After nearly ten minutes of walking since the two o'clock ringing, the way ahead began to brighten, much to Ronie's relief.

There was an opening about a hundred mels across, right in the middle of the forest, with the mansion in question sitting directly in the center of it.

The stone construction was dark gray, and the steeply angled roof was black.

It was a three-story building by the look of it, and the low number of windows made it seem more like a fortress than a mansion. There were a few flower beds in the front lawn just for effect, but now they were full of dead, dried grasses, which only added to the chilly feeling.

“Is this really...the emperor’s villa...?” Ronie wondered.

Tiese pondered the question. “Well...I’ll admit, the mansions on the nobles’ private estates seem bigger than this...Oh, but look,” she said, pointing to the large doors on the front side of the building. “It’s got the crest of a lily and a hawk. Only the imperial family can use that symbol.”

“True...”

The gate at the edge of the forest had the same crest of Norlangarth on it, so this was undoubtedly the emperor’s mansion.

“...Let’s go,” Tiese murmured quietly, starting to walk toward it. Shimosaki followed her, his head drooping.

Ronie looked down at Tsukigake and asked, “Are you okay? You’re not tired?” The little dragon spread her wings and chirped as if to say *Of course not!*

They passed down the footpath of dead grass, through the flower beds, and reached the front doors. Behind them, the blue surface of Lake Norkia was completely hidden by the trees. What was the point of building a house by the lake if you couldn’t see the water?

There was a clanking of metal behind her, and Ronie saw that Tiese had grabbed the handles of the doors and attempted to push them open.

“...They won’t go?” she asked.

Her partner’s red hair shook. “No. I think they’re locked.”

“Well, that makes sense. So...I suppose that means there’s no one inside, right?” she asked, assuming Tiese would agree. But her partner did not let go of the handles.

“Still, a ghost doesn’t get stopped by a locked door, does it?”

“What...?”

She wasn't expecting that rebuttal. True, the ghosts in the old stories usually didn't have solid bodies, and she thought she remembered descriptions of them passing through walls and doors...

"But that doesn't mean we can do it...," she muttered.

Tiese closed her eyes, still holding on to the handles, and began to groan. "Mm...mrrmng..."

"Wh-what are you doing?"

"Mrrrmmngng!"

"Um, Tiese? Tiese!" She moved to grab her friend's arm before she abruptly realized what was going on:

Tiese was clearly trying to mimic the Incarnate Lock-Picking trick that Kirito exhibited at the inn in South Centoria earlier.

"Come on...We can't even use Incarnate Arms yet; there's no way we can use it to pick a lock!" Ronie pointed out with exasperation. But Tiese's face was resolute—perhaps even desperate—causing her friend to gasp.

She paused, hesitated, and finally squeaked, "Tiese...why are you doing this...? Is investigating some ghosts that important to you...?"

Tiese exhaled slowly and finally removed her hands from the doors. Her face stayed downcast until she finally asked, "Ronie...do you think ghosts are real?"

"Huh...?"

It was like a question from a little kid. Ronie almost chuckled and asked what had gotten into her, but she stopped herself. Tiese's eyes were searching and serious as they stared at the ground. She was not joking in the least. Whatever the reason, her best friend was asking her in all seriousness, and she ought to respond in kind.

Ronie had never seen a ghost—at least, defined as the souls of people who died holding on to great hatred or sadness, fated to wander the earth instead of reaching the celestial realm. And the same was probably true of her mother and grandmother, who were the ones who had told her the old stories to begin with.

So *were* there ghosts hundreds of years ago, in the setting of those stories? She didn't think so. For one thing, the celestial realm that the souls of the dead traveled to most likely did not exist. Outside of the Underworld was the real world, where Kirito and Asuna came from. There were no gods there, either, just more human beings who'd been fighting for thousands of years.

If there was no celestial realm, then by the stories' logic, the world should be overflowing with the ghostly souls of the dead with nowhere to go. Since that wasn't true, it probably meant that regardless of any hate or sadness a human soul might cling to, it still vanished in the moment of death, and no ghost ever resulted.

Ronie took a breath to prepare for her answer. But before she spoke, a vivid image flooded into her mind, and her eyes went wide.

She'd never seen a spooky ghost before.

But she *had* seen the glimmer of a dead person's soul.

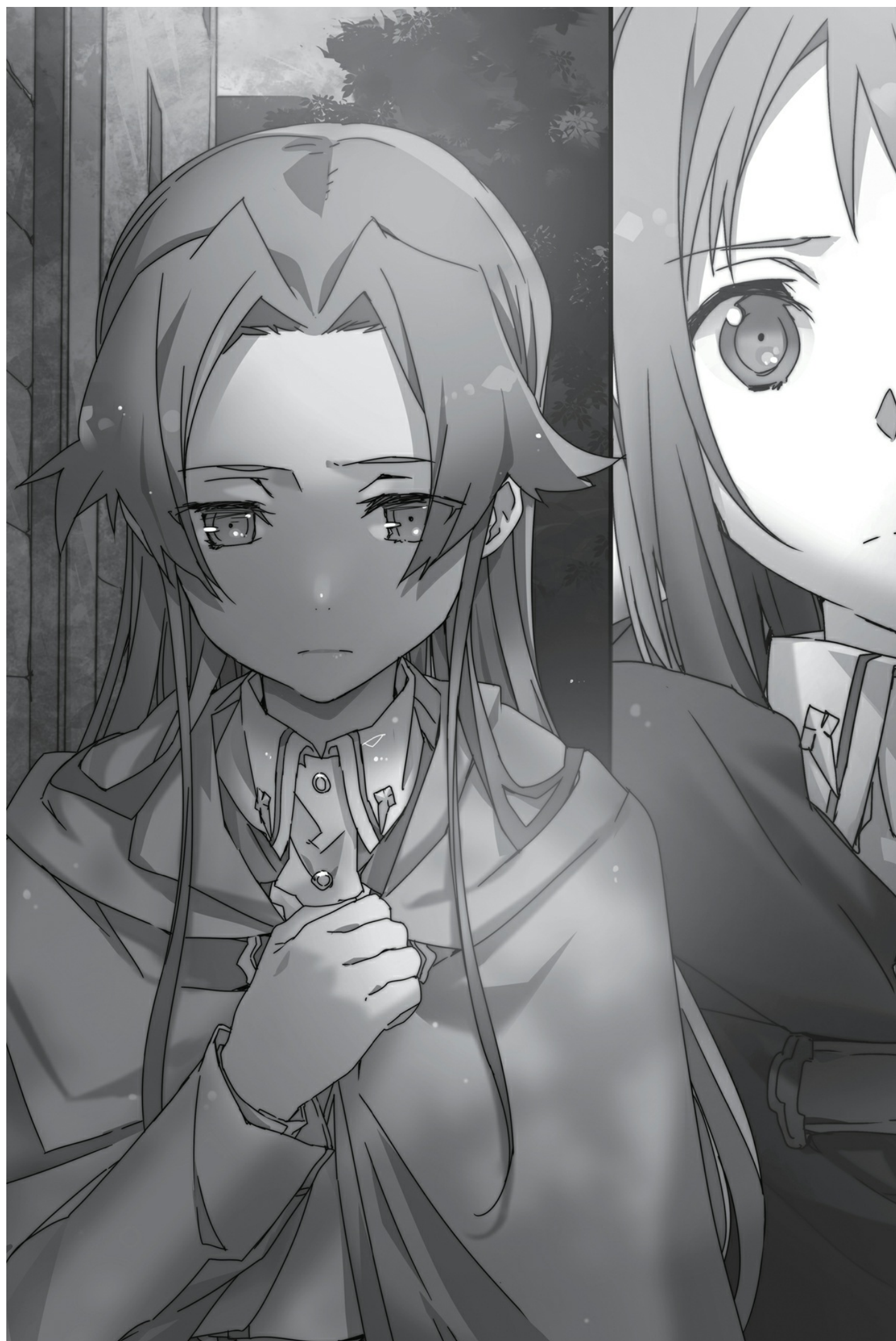
It was at the very end of the Otherworld War, when the man in the black cloak who was leading the red knights from the real world got into a violent clash with Kirito, who had just woken up from his long stupor.

The huge blade that the man in the cloak had wielded had been pushing down on Kirito's sword, until it seemed like it might slice into his shoulder—when Tiese had clasped her hands together and prayed: *Please, Eugeo. Help Kirito...*

And as though in answer to that call, a translucent golden arm had appeared and propped up the Night-Sky Blade. With the arm's help, Kirito had pushed back the enormous knife and won his desperate battle against the man in the black cloak. There was no doubt it was the hand of a person who no longer lived: Kirito's friend and Tiese's mentor, Eugeo the Elite Disciple.

"Tiese.....are you.....?"

All thoughts about the logic of ghosts were gone from her mind. At last, she felt like she understood why Tiese was fixated on the rumors of ghosts at the abandoned building in the woods.



She reached out to touch the back of her despondent friend—when a faint but undeniable sound caused her to flinch. Tiese’s face rose swiftly in reaction.

It was not a natural sound, but an unpleasant scraping of metal on metal. And it was undoubtedly coming from the other side of the locked doors.

Ronie brought a finger to her lips in a hushing gesture to Tiese, then carefully pressed her ear to the door.

She waited several seconds. There was nothing coming through. But the sound earlier was no illusion.

Ronie pulled away from the door to stare at Tiese, whose face was pale. Her friend whispered, “We have to get in there...”

“.....”

Ronie wasn’t sure whether to agree.

Even if the ghost rumors were accurate, it was impossible to believe the ghost would just so happen to be that of Eugeo, the boy Tiese had pined for in life. Eugeo had perished on the top floor of Central Cathedral; he wouldn’t show up as a ghost in the villa on the emperor’s private land.

And if the sound had been caused by a flesh-and-blood human, rather than a ghost, it was quite possible this person was not just some innocent civilian. The only person who could go in and out of a building sealed by order of the Unification Council and the Axiom Church was someone who could resist the Taboo Index, which was the legal cudgel of the Church.

Ronie thought it best to return to the cathedral at once to report to Kirito or Fanatio, but Tiese burst into action before she could suggest it. She began running south along the mansion’s exterior, looking to circle around the back. Shimosaki followed behind her, bounding and leaping.

“*Krrrrr!*” Tsukigake urged at Ronie’s feet. She had no choice but to follow.

The back door was bound to be locked just the same, however. Whatever it was that Tiese thought she was going to do, Ronie had to stop her from putting herself in danger. And yet, the ten-mel gap between her and her partner wasn’t closing.

After rounding two corners, they were in the backyard, where it was suddenly much darker. There were flower beds back here, too, but hardly any sunlight reached this spot, so they were taken over by bluish mosses and gray vines. The walkway was littered with broken cart wheels and rotting barrels. Now it *certainly* didn't look like an emperor's residence.

The back door that Tiese was looking for ended up being surreptitiously placed on the north side of the building. It would have been quicker for them to circle around to the north than the south, but Tiese ran even faster, hardly paying attention to such details, until she reached the door.

She grabbed the rusted doorknob and turned it, but as Ronie expected, it rattled loudly and stayed firm. Yet, Tiese put even more strength into it. Apprentice or not, her weapon-equipping authority level was nearly 40, so if she set her mind to it, she could end up destroying an ordinary door. However, this mansion had been confiscated from the imperial dynasty and now belonged to the Human Unification Council, so even in the case of an emergency, an Integrity Knight could not destroy the door without the council's permission.

Ronie finally caught up to her partner and promptly grabbed her hand. "Don't do this, Tiese. You're going to break the door."

"But...the sound inside..." her friend replied in a high-pitched wail. Even in the dark of the shade, her skin looked very pale.

Ronie used both hands to envelop Tiese's cold fingers and pleaded, "I heard the sound, too. It wasn't a trick of the ears. But that's why we *have* to think straight."

Tiese's grip on the knob weakened until it came off, at which point Ronie marched her a mel or so away from the door so they could look around the yard.

"...It might be a ghost inside the building, but it could very well be something else. If there's a living person going in and out of the mansion, they'll have left trace evidence of their inhabitation somewhere."

That caused Tiese to blink a few times, clearing her eyes. She nodded, and her dazed expression regained a little clarity and life.

“Yes...you’re right. Let’s look around the area.”

Ronie gave her partner a vigorous bob of her head now that she was looking more like herself, then returned to scanning the vicinity. The gloomy backyard was more cramped than the front, but it was still a hundred mels across and thirty mels deep. There were mossy flower beds on the left and right, and in the center, a stagnant little pond that was dark green. Broken junk littered the footpath, and weeds grew everywhere. Despite the fact that it was her idea in the first place, she had no idea how to look for clues.

But surely looking around at random wasn’t going to do the job. She had to use her head and figure out which spots to investigate in particular.

“If anyone is coming through the back door...,” Ronie murmured, examining the ground in front of the door.

If the dirt was exposed, there might be footprints to find, but unfortunately, even around the back, the paths were all gray cobblestones. Unlike in the front, however, there were thin layers of moss here and there. Not thick enough to preserve footprints, but maybe there was something else...

“Tiese, can you watch the dragons for a moment?”

“Um...okay,” Tiese assented, backing away a few steps. She crouched so she could put a hand on Tsukigake’s and Shimosaki’s backs, keeping them at bay. Satisfied, Ronie held out her right hand.

“System Call, Generate Umbra Element.”

Her command produced shining-purplish light that wreathed a tiny black sphere, like a hole poked into empty space. This was a dark element, the most difficult of the eight elements to control.

As opposed to a light element, this possessed a kind of negative energy and, if released, would suck in nearby objects before it vanished. Water and air were one thing, but if any objects or people touched it, the results could be disastrous. But there were ways to utilize this property that were completely impossible with any other element.

“Form Element, Mist Shape,” Ronie continued, and the dark element silently spread out until it formed a little purple fog cloud. It could be combined with a

wind element's vortex and hurled at enemies as an attack, but that wasn't the point right now.

She used both hands to widen the mist into a thin, flat shape, then whispered, "Discharge."

The purple curtain spread out in front of her. This mist had the ability to draw sacred power into itself, react to it, and vanish. If combined with a whirlwind, the blades of wind would tear the enemy's skin, and the dark mist would cling to the wound, sucking out blood, which was the source of sacred power.

Humans and animals weren't the only things that possessed sacred power, of course—so did plants, even the kind of moss that would cling to cobblestones. They had just a tiny amount, but if trod upon to the point of damage, they would release a trace of sacred power into the air.

The mist was unleashed in the shape of a purple belt, branching apart finely like an actual plant as it sucked along the ground with an eerie glow. The formation it made was undoubtedly that of a human footprint. And based on the way it was glowing, the moss had been very freshly stepped on.

The prints led away from the back door of the mansion to the north, vanishing into the woods surrounding the rear yard.

"That way, Tiese!" Ronie hissed, beginning to run along the fading light of the steps as they proceeded away.

She turned left at the north end of the backyard and caught sight of a little path that opened through the thick woods, almost like the mouth of a cave. The undergrowth was cut away and the branches broken off, so this was clearly human work. There was a series of glowing purple footsteps belonging to *someone* heading down the path.

Ronie stopped at the entrance to the path and waited for Tiese to catch up. "Be careful," she whispered. "We might run into whoever owns these tracks."

"Got it," her partner replied.

Down at their feet, the two little dragons had their wings folded and were wearing serious expressions. If their group continued this way, it could end in battle. She wanted to leave the dragons behind for that reason, but the yard of

the mansion wasn't necessarily safe, either.

Realizing they'd have to take them along, Ronie crouched. "You two have to stay quiet, all right?"

Tsukigake responded with a quiet croon, so she rubbed the dragon's head and stood up again.

The light of the footprints was already fading from the path, but based on the size of the forest, they weren't going to get lost here. She and Tiese shared another look for good measure, then headed into the trees.

Within just a few mels, the cold air stung their skin. It was a warm day hinting of the spring to come, yet their breath fogged up as though it were midwinter.

Ronie had a bad feeling about this. When she had plunged into the throne room of Norlangarth Castle with Tiese during the Rebellion of the Four Empires, it had felt as oppressive as this. It wasn't just cold; it was like the chill that seeped into the walls and floor over years and years was actively sucking out all the warmth.

The bells for half past two hadn't played yet, but the area got darker the farther they walked. Bushes with sharp thorns blocked the sides of the trail, and gnarled branches from the trees loomed down right over their heads.

If it got any darker, they'd need to use light elements to see. Ronie was just mulling it over when Tiese yelled, "Oh! Ronie...look!"

Through the darkness, she could see a number of metal rods standing up. At first, she thought they'd reached the metal fence surrounding the forest, but then she realized that this was not a fence but a lattice pattern. There was a little shrine-like building at the end of the path, with a latticed door in front.

They came to a stop, made sure there was no sign of human presence around the little building, then carefully approached it.

"This building...It's really old..." Tiese murmured. She was right—the stone shrine was darkened from exposure to wind and rain, and moss covered the area where it met the ground. Ten or twenty years couldn't cause that kind of change. The large lattice gate was a bit rusty but must have been made of very high-priority material, because it still seemed very sturdy.

The two halves of the gate were in perfectly seamless alignment, with a heavy-looking padlock around it about a meter off the ground. They grabbed the gate and tried to push or pull, but it was unsurprisingly firm. Behind it was a set of stairs that led down into the ground, where there was nothing but blackness.

“This one’s locked, too,” Ronie said.

Frustrated, Tiese groaned, “And I’m sure there’s something past here...”

To Ronie’s relief, she sounded more rational, not as possessed as she had been a few minutes earlier. She probably wasn’t completely over her fixation on ghosts, but between the back door and this little stone hut, it was clear that whoever was here was a living human, not a specter. The same went for whatever caused the sound inside the mansion.

It was very likely that the person was breaking the council’s order forbidding trespassing, so as apprentice knights, they wanted to expose whoever was responsible and arrest them if they meant to do evil—but that did not justify breaking the lock. There was no crime being committed in sight here.

Unfortunately, they would need to return to the cathedral, give a report, and come back with one of the senior Integrity Knights, Ronie realized. But before she could say this, Tiese said, “Oh...! There!”

She jabbed a hand through the lattice pattern to point at the right wall of the descending staircase. Ronie stuck her face close to the gate and stared into the darkness.

About seven steps down the stairs, she saw something glowing, dull against the black. Hanging from a hooked nail in the wall was a string connected to a long silver object...

““.....A key!”” they shouted together, looking at each other.

That was probably a spare key, in case the user got locked inside the structure. In other words, this stately gate was meant to keep intruders out.

They tried to reach through the gate toward the key, but the spaces between the metal bars were only ten centimeters wide at best, and sticking their arms in to the shoulder wasn’t nearly enough length to get to the key.

“If...If only we could use Incarnate Arms...,” Tiese groaned. Ronie agreed, but if they could do that, then they might as well have learned Incarnate Lock Picking from Kirito. She looked around just in case there was a long stick nearby, but of course there wouldn’t be.

If there was a stick three mels long, they could use it to hook the key off its nail, so that would be a very careless thing to keep around. But if they were going to have a spare key, wouldn’t it be better to keep it much farther down the stairs, rather than next to the gate?

What is this building for anyway? she wondered again.

Just then, she heard a dragon growling down below. Pale-blue Shimosaki was trying to wriggle his body through the space between the bars of the fence. Tiese hastily whispered, “No, Shimosaki, even you can’t squeeze through—”

But at that moment, Tsukigake pushed Shimosaki’s rump with her head. The little dragon’s body popped through the space, doing a somersault before stopping just short of the stairs.

“*Kyurrrr!*” Shimosaki squealed proudly. There was a little rust stuck to his soft down, but he didn’t seem to be injured. The soft puffy layer made the creature look larger than his tiny body actually was.

“Now who said you could do that?” Tiese scolded, but there was a hint of pride in her smile. With the arm still sticking through the gate, she pointed for the benefit of her dragon. “Can you grab that for us?”

He chirped in the affirmative, then tottered down the stairs until he was directly below the hooked nail. The key was 1.8 mels above. As he beat his little wings, Shimosaki jumped once, then twice, then on the third time, he successfully caught the key in his mouth. Then he returned to the gate, elated, and stuck his narrow snout back through the gate.

Tiese took the key and handed it to Ronie so she could use both hands to rub the dragon’s head. Ronie watched her as she stuck the aged key into the lock on the gate. It resisted a little but turned as expected and finally clicked.

After waiting for Tiese to step back, she pulled the gate open, causing it to squeal. Shimosaki fluttered his wings from the inside, urging them to hurry.

Now that the gate was open, they had to investigate what was underground, but when Ronie took another glance into the darkness below the stairs, she felt sweat suddenly flood her palms.

She didn't like the discrepancies at play here: the fanciful steel gate, with its key hung in plain view, asking to be taken. She didn't necessarily think it was a trap to lure intruders underground—why lock the gate at all, in that case?—but she couldn't begin to guess what was down there.

Tsukigake seemed to have caught her master's anxiety and rubbed herself against Ronie's legs. She picked the dragon up and suggested, "Tiese, I'll go and see what's down there. You stay here, and..."

"Absolutely not. I'm going down, too, of course," her friend said firmly. Now Ronie couldn't back out and say she'd prefer to wait outside with the dragons.

"...Fine. Just remember to be very careful."

"Same to you," said Tiese with a grin.

That was enough to embolden Ronie a bit. She smiled back, then walked over to the bushes on the left side of the path, picking out a branch without thorns and breaking it off. Then she generated a single light element and affixed it to the leaf at the end of the branch with the Adhere command.

With Tsukigake under her left arm and the impromptu torch in her right, she set foot inside the shrine. Tiese and her dragon followed her in, and then Ronie closed the gate and locked it again. She wanted to take the key with them, but someone might notice the missing key and realize there were intruders, so she put it back on the hooked nail.

The staircase down was much longer than she imagined. There were thirty steps in all to reach the end, at which point it doubled back for another thirty steps before turning to flat ground at last. Each step was about twenty cels tall, so they were twelve mels below the surface by now. That was three floors' worth of the cathedral.

The air was noticeably warmer than outside, but it was damp and dank and moldy. A part of her actually thought this might be the hidden treasure chamber of the Norlangarth Empire, but in conditions like this, any treasure

would lose its life within just a few years and fall to pieces.

After a full fifty paces along the subterranean corridor, the stairs turned right. At last, some weak light appeared ahead. They couldn't be sloppy now, though. Whatever that light source was, they'd find whoever set it up nearby.

There was over thirty paces of space between them and the light, but Ronie stopped right there, waiting and listening for signs of life. There were no sounds or voices for now. When she resumed walking forward, the hood of her cloak was pulled backward.

She flinched and spun around, exclaiming "...What?!" as quietly as she could.

Tiese was looking up at the ceiling of the corridor with a troubled expression. Ronie looked up as well, but it was the same stone lining as the walls. She peered down again at Tiese.

"We went northwest from the yard, into the forest...then went underground at the building and turned back...Ronie, don't you think we're back under the mansion by now?"

"Uh....."

She envisioned a side profile of the mansion and forest, blinking slowly and nodding. "Yes...you might be right about that. What's your point?"

"Isn't that...weird? If it's a basement for the mansion, they could just build stairs inside the building...Why would there be an entrance dozens of paces away in the forest?"

Tiese had a very good point, she had to admit. That suspicious feeling she got from the key on the wall next to the gate came flooding back, but they weren't going to figure out the answer just standing here, she could tell.

"Maybe if we look farther in, we'll learn something," Ronie whispered. Her partner agreed. In any case, they'd come this far, so they couldn't turn back before they'd investigated this underground passage from end to end.

The interspecies pairs snuck south down the passage, listening intently. Yellow light wavered faintly up ahead. Ronie focused on the air and noticed that among the musty smell was the particular charred odor of an oil lantern. And

among it was another, fainter scent.

Cradled under her left arm, Tsukigake's pointed snout was twitching. Ronie could tell that she'd smelled this smell before but couldn't figure out where. Still, they moved onward.

The light turned out to be coming from two oil lanterns hung on the right wall. The passageway came to an end just past them, but there was something on the left wall. It shone dully in the lantern light. A new barred gate. No...it was...

"A...a cell...?" Tiese whispered. Ronie nodded.

It was too big to be a door. Iron bars ran from floor to ceiling, exactly like the underground jail cells in the city guard's office. There were two large cells here, each one four mels wide. From their angle, they couldn't see farther into them.

They placed their backs against the left wall and crept along its length. The closer they got to the cells, the stronger the mysterious odor. It was like straw that had been dried in the sun or well-used leather armor. There had been a similar scent before...not in the human world but in the Dark Territory...

Before she reached the answer, Ronie stopped. She had come to the very edge of the closer cell. With Tsukigake in her arms, she silently leaned her head around the corner to look inside.

The light from the lanterns on the opposite wall was weak and didn't fully illuminate to the far end of the cell. She extended the light-element branch, and it soon became clear that the cells were not empty. In the corner farthest from Ronie was a trio of prisoners. They were huddled together, apparently sleeping.

The figures, clad in crude and simple clothes, were very small. Each of them was less than a mel and a half tall. Children? ...No, their arms were too long. Their heads were hairless, and their noses and ears were pointed.

They weren't children. They weren't even human.

They were goblins.

She shot back straight upright and pressed the hand holding the lit branch to her mouth. Tiese leaned closer.

“What is it...? Is someone in there?”

Ronie nodded rapidly. She exhaled, then inhaled deeply through her nose. The scent of dried straw was familiar to her because it was the body odor of the mountain goblins she had smelled when visiting their dwelling.

“Yes...three mountain goblins. I think they’re the tourists who were taken out of the South Centoria inn.”

“What...?” Tiese said, wide-eyed. She leaned around Ronie, clinging to her, to look into the cell. Three seconds later, she pulled back. “You’re right...But why...? Why would the goblins taken from South Centoria be here, in the emperor’s private holdings in Norlangarth?”

There was no immediate answer to that question.

To travel from South Centoria to North Centoria, they would have to pass through either East or West Centoria, so in either case, it would involve crossing the Everlasting Walls twice. In order to move through the one gated checkpoint between each city, you needed a travel pass or a one-day certificate, and even the certificate was difficult to obtain, much less the pass.

While the people who abducted the goblins by forging an order from the South Centoria city government and impersonating an official might be able to forge a permission certificate, there was still the question of if they would risk the danger of being stopped at the gates, just to get them up to the northern empire. There was just as much land in the southern empire, with equal opportunity to hide the goblins.

“...We can think about this later,” Ronie murmured, both to herself and to Tiese. “We have to break them out and take them to the cathedral.”

“Yes...but the cell’s going to be locked, of course.”

Tiese was right about that. They looked around at the walls, but there didn’t seem to be any keys around. The situation was vastly different from before, however.

Right before their eyes were tourists from the dark realm who had been abducted by falsified orders. This was clearly an act of treason against the Human Unification Council, and as knights, apprentices or not, Ronie and Tiese

could rectify this situation as they saw fit.

“I’m going to break the bars,” Ronie said, grabbing the hilt of her Moonbeam Sword.

The material of the metal bars was probably the same as that of the gate up on the surface. There was almost no way her sword could be of a lower priority level. Whether she could cut it or not depended on the skill of the wielder.

“...All right. Go ahead, Ronie,” said Tiese, who even smiled for a brief moment. She glanced at the cell again. “But we should wake up the goblins before you do it. They’re going to be terrified if you just start smashing through the bars with a combat technique.”

“Good point...”

Tiese’s concerns were valid, but it would be a challenge to wake the exhausted, terrified goblins without making much noise. If they started to scream, the kidnapper in the mansion above them would surely hear it.

Naturally, slashing the metal bars with a sword would make noise, but if Ronie used the quickest technique she knew, and it was perfectly successful, she could minimize the amount of noise. Still, that required waking up the goblins beforehand.

Ronie crouched down to let Tsukigake go. Then she put her hands around her mouth to call out to the sleeping goblins.

Just then, a tremendous noise filled the passageway, like extremely heavy objects being scraped against each other. Ronie and Tiese jumped up, startled, as the three goblins in the cell also bounced to their feet and noticed the girls standing before the bars.

“Giie!”

“Please stop! Don’t hurt us anymore!”

The three clung to one another and trembled, a sign of the very cruel and traumatic treatment they’d been given. She wanted to reassure them that they’d come to save them, but there was a more pressing matter at the moment.

The wall at the end of the passage, which they'd taken to be a dead end, was slowly rising. It was a hidden door—and almost certainly the source of the sound they heard faintly from outside the front door of the mansion.

And if the door was opening now, that meant someone was coming into the underground passage.

There was nowhere to hide. The closest corner in the passage was over thirty paces behind them; there was no way to run that far in time.

"We'll have to fight," Ronie heard Tiese whisper.

Indeed. If there was no place to hide, the only remaining options were to fight or surrender. The choice was clear.

Ronie and Tiese drew their swords and held them with both hands in combat stances. On the floor before Ronie, Tsukigake had her wings outspread—a position meant to protect her master—while Shimosaki did the same in front of Tiese.

"Tsukigake, Shimosaki, get into the cell and be quiet!" Ronie commanded at a hiss.

The little dragons crooned discontentedly but followed the order. First, Tsukigake squeezed between the iron bars. She beat her little legs, twisting her body until she popped through and rolled into the center of the cell. The goblins along the back wall shrieked in terror, but they would soon realize that the dragon meant them no harm.

Next, Shimosaki attempted to get through. The hidden door was already half up, sending a chalky-white freezing mist through from the darkness. The darkness was so thick that they couldn't see whoever was on the other side of the door, but the presence was absolutely there.

"Hurry, Shimosaki!" Tiese cried. Shimosaki groaned painfully. Apparently, these bars were just slightly narrower than those of the gate aboveground. Perhaps because of being picky around fish, Tsukigake's slightly smaller build was able to squeeze through, but the base of Shimosaki's wings was too wide.

Perhaps they could push him through, but that might end up breaking his delicate wings. And in the meantime, the door continued to rise.

“Forget it, Shimosaki! Get behind us!” Tiese shouted, squeezing her sword. Shimosaki answered, pulling back out of the bars and rushing behind the girls.

At last, the hidden door reached the ceiling and came to a stop with an even louder rumble.

From the darkness a few seconds later came the dry, crisp sound of footsteps—*tok, tok, tok*—over the stone floor toward them. Ronie had to utilize all her self-control to keep from using her combat techniques to cut the figure before it came into view. That would be the act of a coward, not a knight, and killing the enemy would leave their identity and reason for kidnapping the mountain goblins a mystery.

A few more seconds passed, though they felt like an eternity, and a figure appeared in the weak light of the oil lanterns.

It was so black that it seemed like darkness itself cut into the shape of a person. Very soon they realized that it was a pitch-black robe, but the effect was so severe that for the first instant, Ronie couldn’t even be sure it was a living person.

No, it is definitely a human.

And she recognized its presence.

This was the man in the black robe who had kidnapped Leazetta, the daughter of Commander Iskahn and Ambassador Sheyta. The figure in the hallway before them had the exact same air as that person on the top floor of Obsidia Palace—somewhere between man and monster.

But it wasn’t possible.

The kidnapper in the black robe had jumped from the window of Obsidia Palace and vanished just three days ago. Over three thousand kilors separated Obsidia from Centoria. That was half a year’s travel by foot, three months by carriage, or two full weeks using the horseback messengers in the ten towns and villages that spanned the distance. The only way to cross that span in three days would be dragons—but there would be panic if someone other than an Integrity Knight was flying over the human cities.

Was it the same person or just someone very similar? Ronie stared fiercely,

hoping to catch a glimpse of some detail that would help her make that determination.

The kidnapper's right arm had been severed by a chop from Ambassador Sheyta, the Silent Knight, followed by Ronie's Aincrad-style Sonic Leap to cut off his left. A very powerful user of sacred arts could regenerate limbs by healing them, but the movement in those limbs would be awkward for a week afterward.

But this man—that was still an assumption—took a step into the hallway and then went totally still. From the darkness of the figure's deep hood, Ronie and Tiese could feel a prying gaze that clung to their skin.

He's trying to predict what we'll do first...Or no, is he waiting for something...?

Ronie put a little more pressure into her grip on the handle of the Moonbeam Sword. Whatever the man was waiting for, they had no reason to oblige him. If this was indeed the same kidnapper from Obsidia, he would use poison. Better for them to attack before he could use it on them somehow.

They couldn't just kill him. Ronie would strike the enemy's right leg; Tiese, the left. That would rob him of the ability to fight.

Ronie pointed the tip of her sword a bit to the left. Tiese instantly understood her intent and leaned in the opposite direction.

Their breathing aligned in preparation for a simultaneous execution of the Aincrad-style technique Slant. Inhale, exhale, inhale...

The moment she sensed she was perfectly in sync with her partner, Ronie started to move. But as though stealing the very breath from her lungs, the man in the black robe acted first.

If he had moved to attack, they would have done their technique. Instead, the man lazily lifted his hands and simply swept back his hood. That was enough to throw off Ronie's timing, and she pulled back her sword just a bit.

A deep voice rumbled, "Unexpected guests, then. Or...perhaps I should call it the guidance of Vecta."

She recognized that deep, raspy voice. It was nothing like the hoarse whisper

of the kidnapper in Obsidia.

For one thing, the movement of his arms was very smooth. And more importantly, Ronie knew his features. They were sharp and fierce. His mustache and beard were gray and fashioned into pointed ends, his eyes the pale blue of a frozen lake.

“...N-no way...,” Tiese stammered.

Ronie wanted to say the same thing.

It was the sixth emperor of the Norlangarth Empire: Cruiga Norlangarth.

Details came flooding back. Black wall hangings on fire, the distant sound of swordfighting.

But that wasn't possible. Emperor Cruiga died in the imperial throne room at just about this time last year.

Ronie and Tiese had crossed swords with the emperor in person. They'd dealt with his High-Norkia style of combat, where each technique had big, exploitable holes but also deadly power; the battle had lasted over five minutes. When Deusolbert had finally arrived, he'd pierced the emperor's right leg with an arrow from the Conflagration Bow. That brief moment was enough for Ronie and Tiese to unleash their best attacks, driving the blades deep into each side of the emperor's breast.

No human being could survive such wounds. Deusolbert confirmed the emperor's death, and the body was taken to the cathedral, where it was given a cremation with the bodies of the other two emperors. The imperial remains became lights of sacred power, and Ronie saw them melt into the air with her own eyes.

So Emperor Cruiga couldn't possibly be alive.

And yet, the man in the black robe before her couldn't be anyone *but* Emperor Cruiga.

Her mind went numb. Ronie couldn't move or even speak. Her vision narrowed, and her bodily senses faded. The man's unfeeling, icy eyes got bigger and bigger, crowding out everything else.

And because she had fallen into a state of numbness, her reaction came just a moment too late to the faint sounds coming from behind her.

Footsteps...Sneak attack...Enemy!

The thoughts burst through her mind. Ronie kept her left hand pointed toward the man with the emperor's face and spun her head the other direction. But the newly arrived man in another black robe was already leaping backward out of the way.

And in his hand was the downy-blue ruff of a juvenile dragon's neck.

"Gyurururuu!" the dragon gurgled in pain.

"Shimosaki!!" Tiese screamed.

To the girls, Tsukigake and Shimosaki were irreplaceable partners whom they'd spent eight months with together, ever since their hatching from the eggs laid by their mother, Akisomi. The thought of those dragons being harmed was unbearable.

Tiese flew at the man in the black robe in a mindless blur, but like Ronie, she froze stiff just a step away.

The man had drawn a large knife that he pressed against Shimosaki's neck. The edge of it was mottled and green, clearly coated with a poison of some kind. Shimosaki sensed the danger and stopped struggling.

Slowly but surely, the man backed away, until there were over five meters of distance between him and the girls. They needed to do something, but they couldn't afford to budge from where they stood.

"You knights value those lizards too much," mocked the man with the face of Emperor Cruiga from the hidden door. "They are nothing but beasts. It strains understanding why you should be so close, when there are plenty more where they came from."

"I wouldn't expect the likes of you to understand anyway," Tiese said in a stifled voice, thick with emotion. "Order your man to release him. If you harm even a single plume on that dragon's body, neither of you will leave this place alive."

“Ha-ha-ha. Even as knights, you are as bold as ever.” The man who looked like the emperor laughed, his voice cracking. He traced his left breast with his fingers—the very spot where Tiese’s sword sank into him one year ago.

“Unfortunately for you,” he continued, “I will be the one giving the orders. Drop your swords and kick them along the ground to me. If you make even one extra move, your little lizard’s head will fly.”

And so will yours, Ronie thought darkly. But even if the man was the real Emperor Cruiga, his life was not a fair trade for Shimosaki’s. Tiese looked to her, gaze pleading, and Ronie gave her a little nod.

The girls dropped their naked blades to the ground. With a silent apology to her sword, Ronie placed the tip of her boot against the hilt and slid it toward the emperor.

The emperor extended a foot from his robe to stop the two swords, then kicked them carelessly back into the passage behind where the hidden door opened. Their silver shine was soon swallowed by the darkness.

“Very good. Now, for your next orders...”

From the depths of his robe, he pulled out a black, gleaming key, which he tossed to Ronie. She reached up to catch it with both hands. Despite having been on his body, the key was as cold as ice.

“Open the cell next to the goblins, go inside, close the door, then lock it.”

Ronie was hoping that if he approached them, careless after having disarmed them, she could grapple with him barehanded and take him hostage, then demand the man behind them release her dragon. But the emperor was calm and careful, keeping his distance. She glanced back and saw that Shimosaki was holding firm not to agitate the poison blade, despite the occasional struggle.

Once they were inside the cage, escape would be almost unfathomably difficult, but there was little choice now. Ronie gave Tiese an eye signal, then approached the empty cell on the left. She unlocked the door with the key, then walked inside with her partner. Then she closed the door, reached back through the bars, and felt for the lock so she could insert the key again and turn it.

If only I could turn it just enough to make it look locked without actually

closing it all the way... But that would not work. She remembered Kirito saying something like *The keys and keyholes of this world aren't mechanical contraptions—they're system-controlled locks.*

The sacred word *system* was supposed to refer to the workings of the world, she knew. So Kirito was essentially saying that the key-maker calling, which was passed down from parent to child, involved punching keyholes in metal plates using special traditional chisels handed down from ancestors, then fashioning the metal piece that was punched loose into the key—and that the workings of the world ensured that only that combination of key and keyhole would ever work together. By that logic, every lock had only two states—locked or unlocked—and it would not be possible to make it “look” like it was unlocked, only to jar it loose with a strong blow.

Ronie turned the key to the right until it began to push back and finally gave a last cruel *click*. She pulled the key out and tossed it to the emperor.

Cruiga caught it with a pale hand, returned it to his robe, and smiled cruelly again. “Heh...I’m glad to see you can obey your betters. I would not want to soil this historic place with filthy lizard blood.”

“...!”

Tiese growled with rage, but Ronie placed a hand on her shoulder. In a strained voice, she said, “Historical...? It just looks like an underground prison to me.”

The emperor pinched the pointed end of his beard between his fingers. “Indeed, it is just an underground prison. But those stones on which you stand are stained with the blood of three hundred years. So many serfs have been punished on that spot by judicial authority...”

“...!”

Now it was Ronie’s turn to gasp. She looked down at the blackened stone beneath her feet.

Judicial authority was a privilege given only to high nobles and imperials that allowed them to punish any who failed to show them proper deference, by whatever means they chose. Only lower nobles or civilians on their lands could

be punished, but Ronie's father, a sixth-ranked noble, said that he'd been humiliated many times by high nobles for very unfair reasons.

But even judicial authority could not take the life of another without a very proper reason—or the noble would risk violating the Taboo Index. And private punishments by nobles did not count as “proper.” Even the Integrity Knights, who possessed the greatest privileges of anyone in the human realm, were limited to taking only 70 percent of a guilty person's maximum life in punishment.

“Any punishment that sheds enough blood to stain the floor would violate the Taboo Index,” Ronie rasped.

The emperor just chuckled again. “Heh, heh-heh-heh...There are countless ways to evade that porous excuse for an index. You might even say that the very history of the four imperial families and high nobles is the pursuit of finding those loopholes.”

Those words brought a hideous memory to Ronie's mind, like a bolt of lightning in the dark of night.

The former first-seat Elite Disciple, Raios Antinous, despite being a fellow student, had laid an intricate and devious trap for Ronie and Tiese and attempted to use judicial authority as an excuse to violate them. It left her skin crawling to imagine what kind of depravity his father and grandfather, who were of the third rank, must have conducted on their own private lands.

And when it came to the imperial Norlangarth Empire, which stood on the shoulders of all other nobles...

“Did you never think it strange, girl? If there is a door into the mansion, why should there be an underground passage that leads out into the woods?” the man asked. Ronie stared at the emperor's face through the bars.

The man's thin mustache sat atop a wan, cruel smile. He did not wait for her answer. “It is to take out the bodies, of course. The last thing we want to do is stain the mansion with the filthy blood of the common folk.”

“H...how dare you!” shouted Tiese. She threw herself to the bars like she was trying to break through them, clutching the steel.

White-hot fury coursed through Ronie as well. The man before her—and his entire lineage—had for years and years locked people in these cells, tormenting them while avoiding the law and unjustly taking their lives.

The gate they found in the woods wasn't meant to protect the passage against trespassers. It was simply the gate through which they carried the dead bodies of the innocent commoners from the cells below. That was why the key to the gate was in such a careless location. And of course it was—who would ever sneak into the emperor's private land with malicious intent?

Despite the best efforts of Tiese, who was technically an Integrity Knight, the metal bars only creaked, nothing more. Just imagining the sheer amount of despair that all those people who'd been locked in here over the years must have felt while holding on to these same bars set Ronie trembling with ever greater fury.

But then the man in the black robe holding Shimosaki hostage silently appeared from the right side of the passageway and took a position behind the emperor. One look at the poisoned knife held to the little dragon's neck actively propelled Tiese away from the bars.

Shimosaki was slumped with exhaustion after struggling, but when he saw his master, he let out a little wail. Tiese whimpered at the sound, and Ronie's eyes filled with tears.

But they couldn't shout. Not now.

In the neighboring cell, through the stone wall that separated them, Tsukigake was still hiding. She was staying quiet, desperately upholding the order she'd received earlier, but if Ronie lost her cool, Tsukigake was likely to do the same. She might rush back through the bars and attack the man in the robe to save her older brother. As cold as it might be to think this way, if Tsukigake got caught, too, then their chances of escape went even lower.

Please, Tsuki. Just stay quietly where you are, Ronie prayed through the thick stone wall. It was the only thing that could keep her rage at bay.

As though he were reading her thoughts, Emperor Cruiga fixed his sharp gaze on Ronie.

“You...the black-haired girl. Don’t you have your own lizard?”

She was so taken aback that she could only shake her head without a word. Tiese took it upon herself to answer.

“We came here to the lake to help that one get over being picky about fish. Ronie’s dragon is still back at the cathedral.”

“Ah...You may not realize that there are five kinds of fish in Lake Norkia. We allowed the serfs to catch four of those kinds, but any who caught the forbidden golden trout would instantly be thrown into these cells,” the emperor said, his voice wistful.

Tiese retorted, “As though they could *choose* what kind of fish bit on their lines.”

“Precisely. They cannot. Yet the starving people had no choice but to let down their lines anyway, praying that the delicious golden trout did not bite their hooks. You might only catch one in three hundred, but the lucky...or should I say, *unlucky* winner could be heard wailing across the water. It was quite good fun to enjoy a drink at the waterside, accompanied by their screams.”

Ronie glared at the chuckling man. It was another test of perseverance not to explode at him.

It was true that violations of the Taboo Index and imperial law were almost all accidental. For one thing, knowingly violating the law required breaking the Seal of the Right Eye. But to be punished for something that one could not knowingly avoid was simply unfair and unjust. And the emperor was essentially coercing the residents of his private holding to fall into misfortune. At its core, it was no different from Raio Antinous antagonizing Ronie and Tiese in order to use his judicial authority on them.

The emperor’s cruel smile vanished. “Hmm. So there is only the one lizard. Then we shall take this one into careful custody. Do not worry, it will be fed... and if you attempt to escape, it will be *fed* to the goblins as a roast.”

And with that, Emperor Cruiga turned toward the hidden door.

But then he stopped and glanced at Shimosaki, whom his minion still held around the neck.

“...Zeppos, do you think that lizard can fit through the bars of the cells?”

Ronie’s heart leaped into her throat. The man he called Zeppos lifted Shimosaki up toward his face and examined him. In a voice surprisingly high-pitched, the man said, “If you shoved it hard enough, maybe.”

“I see.”

The emperor took an oil lantern off the wall and held it aloft toward Ronie and Tiese’s cell. With a sharp glance, he examined the entire cell, then nodded with satisfaction.

Please just turn away now, Ronie prayed. But the emperor turned right, not left, and began walking toward the other cell.

Tsukigake was surely hiding in the corner of the cell, but once the lantern light reached it, that pale-yellow down would be very visible. She had to stop him somehow—but if she carelessly called out to him, he would suspect something. And what difference would buying a few more seconds make anyway?

If he spots you, Tsukigake, do your best to run to the gate up on the surface! she thought, clenching her fists, willing the message to reach her little partner.

The emperor stood before the adjacent cell and lifted the lantern. His brows knit, he craned his neck forward and peered thoroughly around the cell.

Three seconds...five...ten.

“...Hmph,” he snorted, stepping back from the bars. He then returned the lantern to the hook on the wall and, without another look at the girls, returned through the hidden door. The man he called Zeppos followed, Shimosaki dangling from his grip.

A few moments after they vanished, there was a small *thunk* from the darkness, and the hidden door that had receded up into the ceiling began to rumble and descend again.

When the bottom of the door fused with the floor, Ronie let out the breath she’d been holding. Tiese pulled her hands off the bars and pressed her forehead against Ronie’s shoulder as she approached.

“...Shimosaki will be okay...right...?” she squeaked.

“Of course,” Ronie reassured her. “He’s a valuable hostage. They won’t harm him.”

“...Yeah,” Tiese agreed shakily. Ronie rubbed her back over and over before finally disengaging herself. She carefully approached the bars and, as quietly as possible, said to the adjacent cell, “Thank you, goblins.”

She was met with silence at first, but eventually, another whisper returned.

“...They didn’t find the little dragon.”

Indeed, there was only one possible reason that Emperor Cruiga couldn’t see Tsukigake in the cramped cell. The mountain goblins, who had been so afraid of her when she’d first squeezed between the bars, used their own bodies to hide the creature from the emperor’s sight.

“Thank you so much...,” Ronie said. And this time the response she got was a tiny “*Krrr!*”

Tsukigake squeezed back through the bars and came trotting over before Ronie. She squatted as the creature tried to wriggle through the bars again to join her, but Ronie held out her hands to force her away.

“Tsukigake, please. Take the hallway up to the surface and find a way to get to the north gate of Centoria...If the guards notice you, they’ll take you back to the cathedral.”

This was a difficult order to give an eight-month-old dragon. Not only was it over ten kilors from Lake Norkia to North Centoria, it wasn’t easy to get from the mansion to the highway. And they’d already walked a long way today—Ronie couldn’t begin to guess how much of Tsukigake’s life would drop before reaching the city. It was quite possible the dragon would pass out along the way.

But at this point, Tsukigake was their only hope. It would likely be impossible to break the iron bars without a sword, and even if they could, it would certainly draw the attention of their kidnappers and probably end up with Shimosaki dead.

Through her anxiety, she clutched Tsukigake’s body beyond the bars. The dragon chirped, as if to reassure her that she could do the job.

Then she backed away from Ronie, beat her wings twice, and began to run north down the passageway. Soon she was gone from sight, and her trotting footsteps faded from earshot.

“I’m so sorry...Please pull through, Tsukigake.”

Ronie fell to the hard stone floor, clasped her hands, and prayed.



The air was full of the brassy three o'clock bells' ringing.

Asuna set down her cup of dark cofil tea on the table and said, "Kirito, you should eat something. Even a snack would be good."

"Mm...Oh..."

Kirito looked up, arms crossed, and started to reach for the wooden tray of treats before pausing to look at her. It was as though he'd just realized something.

"Wh...what is it?"

"Oh...Just remembering that you used to say that to me all the time," he said, wincing. Asuna knew at once that he was talking about the real world, not this simulation. She sat down in the chair next to him and smiled.

"That's because whenever you get fixated on something, you forget to eat, and sometimes you never even realize you're hungry."

"Yeah...Yui would scold me for that, too," he said wistfully before throwing her a look. He must have sensed something in her expression, because he reached out and gently stroked her hair. She let him do it, and the stabbing pain in her chest began to ease, bit by bit.

They would probably never again see their "daughter" Yui, the top-down AI created in the original *SAO*. Even Yui's processing power would be completely inadequate to match the hyper-accelerated pace of the Underworld, and there were no means of connecting anyway.

At the end of the Otherworld War, Lisbeth and Silica had explained how it was Yui who guided them, Sinon, and Leafa to the Underworld. She'd summoned the whole gang, explained the state of the Underworld and Alice's importance, and asked for their help.

If it hadn't been for Yui, the decoy force that Asuna joined would have been wiped out, and Emperor Vecta would have gotten away with Alice in his clutches. The thought that they would never see the daughter who'd done so much for them—without even the chance to say thank you—was incredibly painful, but she would surely understand. She would know that Kirito and Asuna had no other choice, and that even separated by the walls of time and space, they would forever love her.

Apparently, Yui had described Alice as “the evidence of the existence of all the VRMMO worlds, beginning with *SAO*, and the many people who lived in them.” In that case, Asuna had to give her everything to protect this world. Now that the path to peace between the two realms was finally opening up, she had to do whatever she could to prevent war from returning.

“...We've got to be strong,” Kirito murmured, as though reading her thoughts. He patted her back with the hand he'd been caressing her hair with, then picked up a nougat treat filled with nuts and fruit and popped it into his mouth. The Underworld was a virtual place, but unlike in Aincrad, if you were hungry for long enough, it would eventually affect your life value, and lack of nutrition could lead to disease. Eating was just as important here as it was in the real world.

To no surprise, the investigation at the South Centorian city office this morning revealed that no order to transfer the three mountain goblins had been given, and no officials were sent to the inn. The guard who was present testified that the order certificate had the government's stamp on it, but the actual symbol was simple enough that it would be easy to forge. But only if you could evade the Taboo Index, which outlawed all forgery of seals and signatures in the first place.

If the man—technically, just an arm holding a dagger—that Asuna saw through her past-scrying had killed Yazen, then naturally, he was not bound by the Taboo Index. If he was the same person as the false official who kidnapped the goblins, forging a seal would be child's play.

The government investigation finished after noon, and once the result was in, they started a search through all of South Centoria for the abducted goblins. The city was vast, but it was still only a quarter of the entire breadth of

Centoria. And the city guard's office kept twenty desert wolves with sharp noses that were supposedly capable of detecting if a goblin was being held in a building just from sniffing at the doorway. They were expected to finish searching all buildings by the evening, so Kirito and Asuna were spending the day waiting in their room at the cathedral in agony.

They wanted to join in the search, but Commander Fanatio had pleaded with them to stay inside, worrying about the possibility that this abduction, like the murder of Yazan, was intended to be a trap to lure the delegates into a vulnerable position. They were at least going to wait in the fiftieth-floor meeting room, but this time it was Ayuha who told Asuna that the best way to recover from the strain of her past-scrying was by getting proper rest in her own room.

Ayuha Furia was the foremost master of sacred arts, and even she couldn't properly use past-scrying. She suspected that Asuna's ability to wield it in such a short span of time had to do with Stacia's power.

For over a year, Asuna had been patiently and persistently explaining that she was from the real world and was not the Goddess of Creation, Stacia, reborn, but the members of the cathedral, including the Integrity Knights, still didn't fully believe her. In order to prevent any further misunderstandings, she forbade herself from using the Unlimited Landscape Manipulation ability...and yet, just a week ago, she had to shift the top of the cathedral to the side, just to avoid a terrible collision with Kirito's Dragoncraft Unit One.

In any case, Ayuha theorized that Asuna's mind had built up a certain resistance to a huge influx of information, and that was how she could withstand the stress of past-scrying. But that didn't decrease the actual fatigue caused by it, and Asuna had experienced that for herself, so she wasn't going to be abusing the ability. But the safety of the three mountain goblins was a grave issue that connected directly to the well-being of the entire Underworld.

If a human like Yazan was killed, and the three abducted goblins were framed for the deed—or even if they simply turned up dead—the carefully nurtured glimpse of peace between the two realms would be dealt a terrible blow.

If the search of South Centoria didn't turn up the goblins, there would only be

one option left to them: Asuna would have to perform past-scrying at that inn again to investigate where the carriage went. But that posed its own problem. It was impossible to follow a target while maintaining the art, so as soon as the carriage left the sight of the crystal disc, she would have to move locations and look into the past again. And just the one instance of past-scrying yesterday nearly knocked her out. Asuna didn't know if she could perform it multiple times in a row, even with breaks in between.

The severe look on Kirito's face was probably because he was desperately hoping they'd have the goblins in safe custody before such a thing became necessary. But that hope was growing fainter by the moment. Two and a half hours had passed since the search began, and they hadn't found the three goblins or even the carriage used to spirit them away.

Kirito had only eaten one snack before going silent again, so to ease his anxiety, Asuna tried changing the topic.

"By the way, I hear the apprentice knights went on a trip?"

"Huh...? Oh...yeah," he said, looking back out the window. "I guess Ronie's dragon, Tsukigake, has started getting picky about eating, so they went out to the lake to try to fix the problem."

"Really...? I didn't know dragons had likes and dislikes about food," she said, giggling.

Kirito's lips curled into a grin, too. "Apparently they do. Stablemaster Hainag gave her a piece of advice: Get them to try eating the very fish they catch."

"Ah. Yes, the food you get yourself always tastes better, doesn't it? I remember going into the mountains at my grandpa's house in Miyagi to pick wild herbs and mushrooms..."

Memories of her younger years flooded back into her mind, a reassuring warmth that helped her briefly forget the present distress.

On that note, all the ingredients she'd used to cook things here came from the markets of Centoria; she'd never acquired them from the wild herself. Food in the Underworld began losing life as soon as it was harvested, and that life value was tied directly to flavor. Next time she got the chance, she'd have to try

picking some fresh ingredients herself.

“Where’s the lake they went to?” she asked out of curiosity.

“Um, I think it was in the middle of the imperial holdings in the north. Apparently, the ice over the lake has only just melted...but...,” Kirito said, his words coming slower and slower until he trailed off for good.

Asuna looked at him inquiringly. The delegate was staring at a point in space, his face slack. Eventually, his brow creased, and he whispered to himself, “But could they have been taken...not within Centoria, but somewhere outside...like the old private holdings...?”

It was clear that the unspoken subject of that sentiment was the missing goblins.

Asuna shook her head at once. “That’s not possible. After the incident with Yazen, every person or carriage going through the South Centoria gate has had to submit to a thorough search. Goblins might be small, but they couldn’t possibly hide three of them in a vehicle...And all of them would be trussed up or knocked out, right?”

“I agree that they couldn’t get through the south gate. But...what about the others?” he asked.

She stared at him. “You mean...if the carriage went through the Everlasting Walls to East or West Centoria...?”

“Maybe even twice, up to North Centoria.”

“Hmm...”

Asuna mulled over this idea. It had never even occurred to her.

The Everlasting Walls, which split Centoria and the rest of the human realm with their three-thousand-kilometer span, were a wonder that even Asuna with her considerable VR experience could only admire. Apparently, Administrator had summoned them in the span of a single night with sacred arts—and even with the Unlimited Landscape Manipulation ability of the Stacia account, Asuna couldn’t imagine repeating the same feat. She would be unable to withstand the massive data flow into her fluctlight and would become comatose after ten

kilors of wall, most likely.

Because of this recognition, Asuna considered the Everlasting Walls to be impenetrable obstacles and had never, ever thought of walking atop them, like Kirito did yesterday. So she'd simply eliminated the possibility of the carriage with the mountain goblins sneaking through the walls from her mind.

"...In order to pass through any of the four gates in the Everlasting Walls, you need a Cathedral-issued pass or a one-day travel certificate from one of the four city governments," Asuna said. "But..."

"The kidnapper was already able to forge a notice of transfer from the South Centoria city government. A copper travel pass might be difficult to pull off, but a certificate on sheepskin parchment...By that point, we're getting into very similar methods to what we saw in Obsidia..."

The man in the black robe who abducted Leazetta, the daughter of Sheyta and Iskahn, was in hiding on the top floor of Obsidia Palace, which everyone believed to be completely sealed off. The means that he used to get inside still weren't clear. But the pattern of actions was very similar to this goblin abduction, it had to be admitted.

Kirito pursed his lips briefly. He shot to his feet. "Let's expand the search for the goblins to North, East, and West Centoria, as well as the private lands outside of them."

"I agree..." said Asuna, standing up as well. She looked toward the window on the south wall.

The red sandstone buildings of South Centoria were lit by the afternoon sun. Gold color already lined the sky to the west.

"But it's already evening. Won't it be difficult to search outdoors at this point? And those lands are very large..."

"Yeah...that's true. But while we can start searching the private holdings in the morning, we should start on the city right away. I'll go to the fiftieth floor. You stay here, and—"

His mouth was suddenly blocked by a finger. Asuna said, "I'm going with you, of course. Don't worry, all the fatigue from the past-scrying is gone."

“.....All right,” Kirito said, picking up another nougat off the platter on the table, then popping it into Asuna’s mouth in revenge. “Then you’d better eat up to build your strength.”

She started to say “I know,” but with the treat in her mouth, it came out more like “*Gamh mbow.*”

The pair raced up the great staircase to the fiftieth floor and into the meeting hall, where they instantly drew the attention of the people situated around the table.

The first to speak was the white-robed Ayuha Furia.

“Lady Asuna, you must stay at rest; I insist!”

“I’m fine now, Ayuha. I got a good nap, and I’m feeling much better,” she replied at once, pushing the leader of the sacred artificers brigade back into her seat.

Next it was Fanatio, dressed in uncharacteristically lightweight armor, who turned on Kirito. “Swordsman Delegate, I’m afraid we haven’t heard any good news yet. The search in South Centoria started in District Ten, and they’ve reached the mansions in District Three without any results. It’s been a swing and a miss so far.”

The phrase *swing and a miss* had to have come from baseball, which briefly distracted Asuna as she wondered how such a phrase could exist in a world where that sport didn’t, but this was the least important thing at the moment.

“About that, Fanatio,” she said, too hasty to even bother sitting in her usual seat, “we think there’s a possibility that the carriage holding the mountain goblins passed through the Everlasting Walls and left South Centoria.”

The spacious meeting room went silent. Seated at the round table were Ayuha, Fanatio, and the knights Renly, Nergius, and Entokia. Deusolbert was located at the temporary search headquarters set up in District Five of South Centoria, and the head of intelligence, Xiao Choucas, was off with her subordinates engaging in their own investigation.

The first to speak was Entokia, who was quite loquacious for a senior knight.

“Hmm, wouldn’t that be pretty unlikely to pull off? To pass through one of the Season Gates, you’d need a pass from the Axiom Church, and the pontifex made those with sacred arts.”

“Oh...really? Then if the ones that exist now ran out, it’s impossible to make more?” Kirito asked.

The knight’s head bobbed, close-cropped blue hair staying crisp and firm. “I believe so. I heard they were fashioned in such a way that even the greatest artician could not replicate the detail...”

“That is correct. They are constructed such that the golden symbol of the Axiom Church glows on the copper pass when subjected to the light, but even Sir Bercouli and I were never told how it was made,” added Fanatio. That settled the question of whether it could be faked.

Kirito rested his wrists on the table and folded his fingers. “We can consider the shortage of passes at a later time; for now, it’s very good to know they can’t be faked. The problem is that even without a permanent pass, there’s still a way through the gates.”

“The one-day certificate, you mean,” said Ayuha. Kirito and Asuna nodded. The knights all had brief looks of shock, and Nergius finally opened his mouth to speak.

“Meaning that the rebels have not just forged an order of transfer from the city government but a travel certificate for passing through the gates. How many violations of the Taboo Index do they intend to make...?”

“Cool your head, little Negi. The rebels have already killed a man, so it’s clear they have no fear of the Taboo Index,” said Fanatio. Nergius sucked in a breath, probably to protest her nickname for him, but it only emerged as a resigned sigh.

Instead, Renly patiently lifted his hand before speaking. “But, Kirito, if the kidnappers have passed through any of the Season Gates...we haven’t been checking the contents of any carriages outside of South Centoria. Is it possible they’ve left the capital entirely...?”

“That’s right,” Kirito said to the boy knight. “I think we need to expand the

search for the goblins to East, West, and North Centoria, and also into the formerly private lands outside the city. But it's getting dark already for today..."

"We can prepare to search the private lands starting at dawn. We'll get right to searching in the city. I will take the lead on that," said Fanatio, standing up. Kirito bowed to her.

"Thank you, Fanatio. I appreciate your help."

"It's nothing, really. I just want you to stay here and behave, young man," she said, verbally skewering the anxious swordsman as she strode to a wooden cradle set up nearby. She gave the sleeping Berche's head a loving caress, spoke a few words to the servant waiting nearby, then hurried out of the hall.

Usually during the meetings, it was Tiese or Ronie who looked after the infant. But they weren't at the cathedral this time, Asuna remembered.

Just then, Kirito spoke up. "Um...I'm not going to join in the search, but I would like to go outside for a bit."

He spoke as though seeking permission, but only Fanatio and Deusolbert could tell the delegate no, and they were not present. The three knights and one artifician exchanged looks.

Nergius spoke for the rest by asking "Where do you plan to go?"

"The truth is, the apprentices Ronie and Tiese went out to the lake on the northern emperor's private estate. They were having their dragons catch fish, or something..."

"Ah, fixing a bad eating habit?" Nergius realized.

Entokia promptly added, "That's right, I remember that Negio's dragon Shionade stopped eating anything relating to melon one day as a little pup. That was a lot of trouble to fix, wasn't it? We had to go deep into the southern jungle to find the legendary melon, the sweetest in the world..."

"Not that I asked you to accompany me," Nergius said, deadpan. He turned to Kirito. "The lake in the northern estate is Lake Norkia, correct? It's surrounded by open grassland, as I recall...Not the kind of place where a rebel could hide."

"Well, that's true. But knowing them, if they, let's say, saw a suspicious

carriage ride by, they'd probably decide to investigate it by themselves..."

Asuna couldn't help but agree. Ronie and Tiese were good girls, but after Kirito's tutoring at the school, they'd picked up a little bit of a reckless streak. And now they were apprentices working hard to be recognized as full-fledged knights, so it was easy to imagine their hard effort spilling over into risky behavior.

"It's ten kilors to Lake Norkia, so I'll just zip over there to get them and come back. It'll only take an hour...Forty-five minutes, even," Kirito reassured them, getting to his feet. He headed for the elevating chamber to the north, rather than the staircase to the south. That was presumably so he could fly from the higher floors of the cathedral.

Asuna quickly stood up and added, "I'll go, too!"

Kirito turned back to face her, then glanced at Ayuha. The woman in the white robe was clearly concerned with this idea, but she gave in, realizing she couldn't stop them. Still, she didn't forget to say "Return promptly," so Asuna gave her a polite little bow and trotted to catch up with Kirito.

"Um, if there's any sudden activity in the city, I will go to inform you!" shouted Renly. Kirito called back "Please do!" and opened the door to the elevating disc shaft. The two leaped through it and quickly shut it behind them, then exhaled.

"You look like you're thinking 'We escaped!'" Asuna jibed, side-eyeing her partner.

Kirito shook his head rapidly. "No, I'm not thinking that at all. I'm just worried about Ronie and Tiese..."

"Ha-ha-ha, I know. I'll move the disc."

They stood on the silver disc resting on the floor, and she put her hands around the glass tube standing in the middle of it.

Previously, Airy the operator had manipulated this elevator with sacred arts, but the process was now automated. The large canister embedded in the floor of the elevator shaft was loaded with a great number of wind elements, and by pressing a floor-number button on the wall, it would expel the necessary

number of wind elements to push the disc to that height, then burst them as needed to provide the upward pressure. It still had the glass tube for wind-element generation on the disc, however, so that the rider could use it manually in case of emergency. In other words, instead of the gentle speed of the automated function, you could choose to operate it manually.

Kirito started to say “Just practice safe driving, plea—,” but she generated ten wind elements inside the tube without listening to the end of that statement. When Airy had given her a lesson on how to work the platform, she’d said “Release three when you start your ascent, then one each time you start to lose speed,” but that was the gentle mode when carrying passengers; she’d told Asuna in secret that you could make it go faster.

“Burst!” she commanded, unleashing six of the elements. Green light flashed inside the tube, which emitted a blast of air from its bottom, rocketing the disc they stood upon high into the shaft.

“Wh-whoa...!” Kirito shouted, grabbing Asuna’s shoulders. He always seemed perfectly calm when flying by dragoncraft or Incarnation, but this shaft was frightening to him for some reason. Asuna had heard that it was because he’d nearly fallen from the top of the cathedral before she’d arrived in the world, but he didn’t like to talk about the details.

But the fact of the matter was that Alice the Integrity Knight had told Asuna what had happened, while the Otherworld War raged around them. Before he had the ability of flight, he’d dangled from the exterior of the eightieth floor with nothing but a sword to support him. That was surely a terrifying experience, she believed. But seeing Kirito, who was now mentally older than her, whimpering like a child inside this elevator shaft made her want to shoot them up even faster.

As their six-element ascent started to decelerate, she let off the remaining four. The disc shot upward again, and Kirito clung to her back with a shriek. That was enough teasing for her to be satisfied, and they had just reached the ninetieth floor, so she stepped on the pedal that locked the disc’s position to the wall.

The shaft once connected the fiftieth floor through the eightieth, but in the

process of automating it, they added a new shaft from floor one to fifty and extended the existing shaft up to the ninetieth floor. That was, of course, because the Great Bath on that floor was now open to all, but there was no exit to the outside there, so they had to take more stairs up to the ninety-fifth, the Morning Star Lookout.

This was where they'd eaten lunch with Ronie and Tiese and Hana the cook yesterday, but when sunset was approaching, the aerial garden took on a much different atmosphere. The sunlight seared directly through the openings on the side as it descended, making it feel much like a miniature version of the sunset on the floating fortress Aincrad.

Asuna loved to watch the sunset here, but now was not the time. Kirito rushed ahead to the opening on the north end and reached out his arm to her. She sidled up to him so he could cradle her body.

"Listen...I know we're in a hurry, but...fly safely, okay?" she said.

He gave her a silent grin, then transformed the hem of his black leather jacket into dragon wings. Asuna clung to him as the wings spread wide.

She was relieved that he was going to use the quiet Incarnation flight over the speedy but loud method of wind-element flight...but that relief lasted only a moment. Kirito bounded off the platform, and the black wings beat powerfully against the air to stabilize them briefly...

And then they shot across the sky with an acceleration many times that of the elevating disc when she used six elements at once. A wall of air smacked their faces as the tallest spire of North Centoria's palace zoomed closer. She knew that the cathedral was much taller, but she couldn't help shutting her eyes when they passed over the spire.

If he can go this fast with just Incarnation, what would it be like if he used all of his power to fly with wind elements? she wondered. Then she recalled that she'd felt that once before.

It was at the end of the Otherworld War, a year and three months ago.

When Kirito woke from his comatose state, he had used maximum-speed wind-element flight to chase after Emperor Vecta, who had abducted Alice. At

the time, Asuna knew nothing about the geography of the Underworld, so it was only afterward that she understood how far he'd flown them. In fact, he'd flown a distance of more than six hundred miles in just five minutes, carrying Asuna in one arm. That would be nearly 7,500 per hour, ten times the speed of sound.

Kirito's mastery of Incarnation was strong enough to lift a metal dragoncraft now, but that feat back then was truly a divine miracle. First the flight, then returning Alice's dragon and its brother to egg form to save them from mortal injury, and lastly fighting against the super-account of Emperor Vecta—including a Perfect Weapon Control art that turned the entire sky of the Underworld from day into night.



The question was, did Kirito exhibit special powers at that singular moment, or was he simply holding back his strength now? If the latter, then there was no reason for Kirito to conceal his powers of Incarnation when Ronie and Tiese were in danger, Asuna thought.

She was clinging harder to his shoulders when, as though waiting for that signal, brilliant-green light burst into her vision, and a sequence of explosions sounded just behind her. They accelerated as violently as though struck by some giant's hammer, and Asuna screamed.

Before the calendar of the Human Era began, meaning more than 380 years before the present day, there existed system-designated Moving Objects known as Divine Beasts.

A silver serpent that dwelled in the deep mountain valleys of the eastern empire. A fiery phoenix from the volcanoes of the southern empire. A behemoth ice dragon that protected the mountains of the northern empire. And a winged lion that raced across the grasslands of the western empire—and others still.

There were over forty of these creatures in all, and though they did not have their own fluctlights, they were top-class AI programs equipped with their own verbalization engine that allowed them to communicate with the inhabitants of the realm. The people worshipped these Divine Beasts as the gods of the land and left behind many legends of their prowess.

But to the girl who had established the Axiom Church in the year 30 HE and called herself Administrator, any god beyond those of the Church's self-written history was an impediment to be dealt with. She transformed all the Divine Beasts into weapons—Divine Objects—or had her Integrity Knights exterminate them. By 100 HE, the Divine Beasts had been completely wiped out, and all records of human contact with them had been fed to the flames.

The animals that currently inhabited the human realm could not speak human language. But of them all, there was one creature with a very limited artificial intelligence, and that was the partner of the Integrity Knight: the dragon.

Dragons couldn't speak human language, but they could understand their masters' orders to a very complex degree. A dragon also possessed a heart that tried its very best to serve a master the dragon shared a close bond with.

So Apprentice Integrity Knight Ronie Arabel's juvenile dragon Tsukigake ran

and ran, carrying out her order: “Go down the passage to the surface and find a way to reach Centoria’s north gate.”

The diminutive dragon beat her tiny wings as she ascended the sixty-step staircase, then shoved her body through the bars of the gate at the top and into the outdoors once more.

Behind her was the iron gate she had just come through, and to the left and right were overgrown, thorny bushes, leaving only the narrow path ahead. But Tsukigake did not want to go down the path. She knew the mansion lay in that direction, with its eerie and unpleasant aura. If she went that way, the dark humans who captured her brother, Shimosaki, would find her. They weren’t scary, but Tsukigake couldn’t save Master if she got caught.

The dragon turned right and looked at the top of the brush. The plant was as tall as Master, so she tried to leap and flap her wings to jump over, but the attempt was nowhere near high enough. Tsukigake kept trying, but eventually her wings got tired, and she plopped back down on the stone path, where she bounced like a ball a few times before getting back to her feet.

Getting past the hedge was going to take more drastic measures.

“*Krrrrr*,” Tsukigake chirped to steel her nerves, then folded her wings and stuck her snout into the base of the hedge. Most bushes had a space between the ground and the roots, but this plant’s branches extended to just over the soil and brandished sharp thorns three cens long. Tsukigake tried to crouch as low as possible to slide along the ground and squeeze through the tiny gap, but a thorn caught the base of her neck, sending sharp pain through her flesh.

Tsukigake wanted to pull back, but she gritted her fangs and kept pushing instead. The hard thorns dug into the soft down of her back, tearing the skin that had yet to grow its defensive scales. The pain was so bad that she whimpered, but she kept moving onward.

Getting through the hedge that was no more than fifty cens thick took over a minute. Once Tsukigake was finally free of the thorns, she sprawled out on the damp leaves, panting.

Once the pain receded a little, she curved her long neck as far as possible to look over her back. Those beautiful, soft yellow feathers were tattered and

disheveled, with red spots where she had bled.

Tsukigake had no concept of a “life value,” but like all living creatures, she knew that as long as the blood kept leaking out, she would eventually die. She brushed the disheveled down with her snout and licked each wound carefully. Dragon saliva had a faint healing property, so after enough licking, the wounds stopped bleeding, except for those on the far end of her back, which her tongue couldn’t reach.

But at least the pain was down to a bearable level. With one last shiver to shake off the mud and leaves, Tsukigake stood up on her rear legs.

Nothing but thick forest lay ahead. The sunlight was turning rich and yellow through the conifer trees, and while almost none of it reached the ground, it was enough to tell the directions by.

Ronie had said to go to Centoria, the big human town to the south. Tsuki had never been to this forest before, and they’d come here by riding in a horse-drawn carriage, so the distance was a question, but she had to get back as soon as possible, regardless.

Fortunately, she had eaten plenty of fish from the lake earlier, so she wasn’t hungry yet. She hadn’t eaten much fish at the stables in the past few months because of the smell of the dead ones, but catching them in the water was fun, and they tasted very good, being so fresh. Tsuki had to stop thinking about fish, because remembering the flavor was going to make her hungry again. She began to gallop on all fours through the trees.

Unlike the grassy lawns and ponds at the cathedral where Tsukigake lived, the forest ground was damp and slippery, and the rocks and roots hiding under the fallen leaves made it hard to run. Each time she got tripped up, the little dragon tumbled and rolled but kept on moving south.

After rounding one especially big tree, Tsukigake’s sensitive nose caught the odor of something rotting.

There was a spot on the ground surrounded by gnarled trees where the dirt had been dug up. The black soil was cold and damp and sticky, not like the soft and lush soil of the flower beds at the cathedral. The rotting smell was coming from the hole, but even up close, Tsukigake could not see the bottom.

“Krr...,” she crooned, backing away from the edge. If she fell in, there was no telling if she could escape, and this wasn’t the time to be distracted.

Instead, the dragon circled around the smelly pit and kept running for a few more minutes, at which point more light was visible in the distance. The exit was near. Tsukigake ran and ran, wings flapping, through the last ten mels, and burst through two large, ancient trees into the open.

The fields that surrounded the forest were lit up gold with the fading rays of the sun. Tsuki greedily sucked in the cool, fresh air as she ran up a small knoll.

From there, she saw a distant white wall on the right that crossed the grassland, the sparkling surface of the lake on the left, and the human city straight ahead, small in the distance. It was farther than Tsukigake realized, but if she kept running, she would get there eventually.

“Eventually” wasn’t good enough, though. At this very moment, Master, Master’s friend, and Shimosaki were trapped and terrified in that awful dungeon place.

“Kyurrr!” Tsuki squeaked, quiet enough that none of those dark humans could hear, and resumed running.

It was easier than going through the forest, but the grass here was still tall, and it resisted the dragon’s little body. Tsukigake had to jut her head forward and use her front legs to part the grasses as she ran.

After five minutes, the feeling of hunger was real this time. Child or not, a dragon was a dragon and required much more food to maintain its life value than a dog or a fox of the same size.

The big lake sparkled gold just a hundred mels to the left. Many delicious fish were swimming beneath the surface, the thought of which started swinging her path to the left, but Tsukigake shook her head and returned to the proper direction. A little hunger wouldn’t be fatal, but Master was in a life-and-death situation.

If memory from the carriage window served correctly, the south part of the area surrounding the lake was a very large field that had fallen into disuse. There would probably be an old, shriveled potato or two there. Tsukigake ran

another five minutes based on that very hope.

Then Tsukigake's front feet abruptly sank into the ground, and she promptly lost her balance. The dragon rolled and rolled before finally coming to a stop, and her back felt cold and wet where it touched the ground. The sting of the wounds on her back returned, fresh and painful, and she wailed in agony.

But she couldn't just lay there. This was the wetland area, where the water from the lake trickled out and covered a wide stretch of land. Tsukigake had never been in something like this, having been raised at Central Cathedral, but her instincts said that remaining in the cold water would increase the loss of life. The dragon sat up, stretched her neck and head, and examined the area again.

The areas ahead and to the left were blocked by wetland, so the only dry ground was on the right. But it was completely unclear how far there was to go in order to get around the wet area. If it continued all the way to that white wall in the distance, it would mean so much lost time.

"Krrrrrr...," Tsuki whined, totally at a loss.

Just then, in response to her wail, a small creature popped its head out of the grass a short distance away and squeaked, *"Kyu-kyu!"*

It had short brown fur, ears that were about as long as its entire body, and small, round eyes. The creature looked up at Tsukigake and tilted its head to the right, as though wondering what this animal was.

Tsukigake wondered the same thing. From its pointed snout to the end of its short tail, it was about thirty cens long. The people of the capital called this a long-eared wetrat, but of course, Tsukigake did not know that.

Examining the brown rat's elliptical body, which had no discernible boundary between head and torso, Tsukigake began to wonder if it would taste good. The animal sensed the dragon's sudden pang of hunger and began to retreat into the grass, so she called out again. *"Krrr!"*

Wait!

Whether the rat heard Tsukigake's thought or not was unclear, but it stopped moving, leaving just its long, twitching nose sticking out of the grass. Two

seconds later, it slowly, hesitantly emerged again.

If she scared the rat again, the creature would flee for its life, so Tsukigake made her body as low to the ground as possible and burbled, trying to reassure the other animal that she wasn't going to eat it. *"Rrrrrr..."*

The rat twisted its head again, to the left this time, and walked out of the grass. The ends of its long limbs were webbed. It was clearly an animal that had lived in this area for a long time. Perhaps it might know the way through these wetlands.

"Kyurrr, kyurrrrrn."

I want to go south. Tell me, if you know the way.

Tsukigake couldn't put these thoughts into words, so she had to hope they got across somehow. The rat's long ears twitched. It squeaked, *"Kyu."*

It felt to Tsukigake like the creature was complaining that it was too hungry to do such a thing.

If you show me the way, I can give you as many tasty fish as you want, she offered.

I don't want fish. I like to eat nuts.

But there isn't a single tree around.

But just then, a small black object bobbed into view on the water between the two animals. The rat squeaked and leaped into the water, grabbing the object with both hands.

It was indeed a nut. It had probably fallen from one of the lakeside trees into the water, then slowly floated along until it was caught in the trickle that went into the wetlands. The rat carefully lifted it to its mouth and bit into it with its long, large front teeth, but it only made a soggy, mushy sound, not the proper crispy crunch of a dry nut. It had lost most of its life taking on so much water.

"Krrrrr, kyurrr!"

If you show me the way, I can give you lots of fresh nuts. Dry and crunchy ones that aren't at all soggy.

“Kyuuu...”

Really? Even one dry nut for the year would be considered a lucky find.

I promise. You can eat as many as you want, every day.

Okay, then. Follow me.

Tsukigake didn't actually know if they had traded words in this precise manner, but it felt that way, at least. The rat finished eating the blackened nut and moved across a patch of dry land nearby, then plunged through a big tuft of tall grass.

The dragon hastily leaped over the water and stuck her head into the spot where the rat had vanished. Among the overgrown grass, there was a tunnel about thirty cens around. Dried grass was knotted and packed against the walls—it clearly was not a natural development.

The rat had stopped farther down the tunnel, wagging its tail to indicate it wanted to be followed. It was a tight fit for the little dragon, who was a fair bit larger than a rodent, but it wasn't as bad as those bars in the underground cell, and the dried grass beneath her feet was a relief.

“Krrrrr!” Tsukigake cried to bolster her courage, then charged down the dark, narrow tunnel. The rat faced forward and sped through the passageway, its short limbs scrabbling rapidly.

About three mels ahead, the tunnel forked left and right. The rat hurtled down the left passage without slowing, so Tsukigake followed. Soon there was another fork, and they chose the right path this time.

Now they came to a round room one mel across, woven of the same dried grass as the tunnel. Along its walls, one grown rat and three little ones were eating what looked like grass seeds. When Tsukigake came into view, the adult screeched a warning, but her guide through the tunnels squeaked something in explanation, which calmed its partner. It then proceeded past the curious baby rats and ducked its head into a new passageway.

Apparently, the rats with the webbed feet had woven these tunnels of dried grass throughout the wetlands. It would be all too easy to get lost in them without a guide. As they ran, their footsteps sloshed and splashed, so the

bottom was clearly coming into contact with the water. All the islands dotting the soggy marsh must have been connected by the dried grass tunnels, which had just enough buoyancy to stay afloat.

By the time Tsukigake lost count of how many forks, intersections, and little chambers they'd passed through, there was a small light at the end of the tunnel. What looked at first like a dead end actually had looser grass around the walls, which opened up enough to allow some of the setting sunlight in.

The rat stopped at the dead end and stuck its pointed snout out of the gap in the grass, carefully smelling the outside air. Then it pushed its whole head through. Satisfied, it left the tunnel, parting the grass on the way out.

With a bit more trouble, Tsukigake managed to leave the tunnel and discovered that they were on the south side of the wetlands now. Dry grassland was before them, and a human-built wooden fence beyond that. That had to be the field area she'd seen from the carriage.

"Kyurrr, Krrr!"

Thank you, Mr. Rat. I can go on from here, Tsukigake said. But the brown rat's head swiveled and tilted to the right.

"Kyuiii!"

When will you give me the nuts?

I don't have them now. But I will bring you many nuts very soon, I promise, Tsukigake tried desperately to convey. But the rat's long ears were pointing up and flattening down, back and forth, in distress.

No, I want to eat them now! I want to eat a lot of dry, crunchy nuts!

Then...come with me. You can have your nuts if we go to town.

The rat's beady eyes blinked in confusion.

Town? What is town?

Town is...where there are many humans.

Humans? Humans chase us with sticks when they see us.

You'll be fine if you're with me. We don't have time. Let's go!

Tsukigake began to march again. But the rat grabbed the end of the dragon's tail.

"Krrrr!"

What's the matter?

"Kikiii!"

You can't go that way. Father said that something scary is on the other side of that wall.

Scary? You mean humans?

I don't know...but none of us who've gone over that wall have ever come back.

Tsukigake considered this information. The south side of the wooden fence as seen from the carriage was simply a field that had grown fallow with disuse, and there hadn't been any humans there. Master said that all the *surfs* had been *libberaded*. Whatever that meant. If the "scary thing" the rat was talking about was humans, there would no longer be any danger there.

Also, Tsukigake's hunger was reaching a peak. If there wasn't anything to eat in the field, there would be no strength left with which to run.

"Krrrruu..."

It's all right. There's nothing scary there anymore. If we don't pass through there, we can't get to the town.

But the rat still seemed suspicious, until at last its appetite won out over caution.

"Kiki!"

All right, I'll go with you.

Good. Let's hurry, then.

Tsukigake began to run across the firm, dry ground. The rat was surprisingly fast, and it kept up with her.

They zoomed across the grassland and approached the wooden fence, where they quickly looked left and right. There was an entrance to the field a bit to the left, so they headed that way.

Fortunately, there wasn't a gate or any bars over the simple entrance to the field. The wooden sign hanging on the crosspiece featured the human words IMPERIAL ESTATE PLANTATION, but neither Tsukigake nor the rat could read it, of course.

Beyond the gateway, they smelled earth and withered plants. It wasn't a good smell, but at least it was better than that dark hole in the woods.

The plantation contained row upon row of vegetables, the names of which they did not know, but because no one was around to tend them, all the plants had died. Yellow, wilted leaves littered the ground, and many of the plants had completely withered into nothing and returned to sacred power.

It didn't seem as though Tsukigake would find any edible vegetables or fruit. Disappointed, they kept trotting through the middle of the plantation. At least the ground was easier to run on here than elsewhere. If they passed through this field, Centoria would be very close. There were already many little buildings along the horizon, beyond which was the familiar sight of the white tower rising into the distance.

"Krrrr!"

There. That's the town, Tsukigake said with pride to the rat. To her disappointment, the rodent did not seem particularly impressed.

"Kikii!"

That's weird. Do they have nuts there?

Of course. Many of them. So many that you and I could never eat all of them in our lifetime.

Really? Then may I take some back for Father and Mother and my sister?

Sure. I'll ask if you can have some for your entire family.

Because they were so absorbed in their conversation as they ran, Tsukigake initially failed to recognize that there was something else among the smell of rotting crops.

The rat noticed it first and squeaked a loud warning.

From the ridge ahead and to the right emerged a long, narrow shadow—but still bigger than Tsukigake—that blocked their path.

It was a creature the likes of which the dragon had never seen before. The torso and tail were long and slender, and the legs were short but powerful. There was white fur around its long, jutting snout and eyes, but everything else was dark gray.

The beast stood silently, blocking their path, so Tsukigake cautiously called out, “Kyurrrrrr...”

Let us pass. We only want to get to the town.

But the ashen creature just stared at the two through pale-red eyes and gave no response.

They were at a loss for what to do. Then there came a scuttling noise from the fields to either side. More of the same creature emerged from the ruined crops. There were four of them. Two of them snuck around the rear in total silence, meaning that five of these animals were now surrounding Tsukigake and her guide.

The gray creatures were a scourge to the serfs who once worked these fields, who called them point-nose coatis. They were nocturnal and omnivorous and would eat the crops in the fields at night. With the permission of their supervisors, the serfs were allowed to let large dogs roam the fields at night. The dogs fought the coatis bravely to limit the damages, but once every two or three years, a pack of them would attack and kill a dog.

But as the residents of the private holdings were freed from their bondage a year ago, they had moved on to Centoria and the surrounding villages, taking their dogs with them. The fields went fallow with no one to tend them, and even the plants that had continued fruiting over the next half year were fully withered now. Most of the coatis had starved and died without their food source—wild animals in the Underworld had a prescribed range of habitation and could not wander beyond it—but the individuals with the highest life value managed to survive by eating the smaller animals that wandered into the fields, the insects they previously ignored, and even the flesh of their own kind. It was not adequate food, however, and so they were constantly hungry and dangerously desperate.

Only when the coatis surrounding them began to growl menacingly did

Tsukigake realize the peril they were in.

The long-eared wetrat trembled in silence. Tsukigake protectively surrounded her companion with her long tail and growled.

“Gyurrrrrrrr!”

If you intend to fight, I would advise against it, she tried to say, but the coatis only growled louder and fiercer. And unlike with the rat, there was no sense of meaning or will behind their vocalizations.

Though Tsukigake couldn't have known this, as distant relatives of the Divine Beasts of ancient times, dragons had the ability to share their will with wild animals. The power was initially designed to warn off the regular animal units from Divine-Beast habitats. All animals were not given their own artificial intelligence from the start—only by having contact with Divine Beasts did an animal unit receive a minimal level of thinking ability and a database.

In other words, the rat companion gained that ability when Tsukigake spoke to it. But this phenomenon worked only on units with a much lower priority than the speaker. And the priority of these coatis, who were hardy enough to have survived these severe conditions, was only slightly lower than Tsukigake's. The five of them didn't have the ability to think rationally; they were driven only by the fundamental principle of hunting for food to satisfy their hunger.

Tsukigake stared down the wild beasts that did not respond to her thoughts.

The dragon had never been in this situation before. For that matter, she had never been on her own outside of the cathedral before this. But her instincts told her that these creatures did not just want to fight over food but intended to kill the pair of odd companions.

If Tsukigake died or was injured, she couldn't call for help for her master and Shimosaki. Tsuki's life was currently lowered, but on second look, the coatis were scrawny and starving, too, so perhaps if they ran with all their might, they could escape the predators.

But the rat was a different story. It wasn't slow, of course, but they'd come a long way from the wetlands, so it was surely tired. Tsukigake had promised the rodent all the delicious nuts it could eat. She couldn't abandon it now.

There was no routine in Tsukigake's AI program for leaving the rat as a sacrificial decoy to escape the coatis. So the juvenile dragon summoned up her courage to fight the five predators and roared as fiercely as she could.

"Garrrrrrr!"

This time, the wild beasts understood her meaning. The coati standing directly ahead of them opened its mouth wide to expose small, sharp fangs.

"Gyaaaaa!"

Right on cue, two coatis leaped in from the sides.

Tsukigake clenched her tail around the petrified rat and leaped as high as she could. The coatis jumped, too, but the dragon's wings gave her extra lift.

The coatis collided in midair; they fell to the ground in a tangled heap. Tsukigake used the opportunity to glide toward the west, landing in the middle of the field. There were still tall millet stalks standing in this particular spot, which would hide them for a few moments.

But there would be no escape with the rat wrapped up in Tsukigake's tail—and even less of a chance to fight five predators off while protecting the creature. The first step had to be hiding the rat in a safe location.

For that, Tsukigake chose a wooden bucket left out between the rows of plants. It was rotting away into nothingness, but for now, it still had its shape. She rolled the empty bucket over the top of the rat and whispered *Stay quiet!*

There was no answer, but the animal surely understood that moving or making any sound would be dangerous. Just in case, she needed to pull the enemy away. Tsukigake ran to the south, making lots of noise on purpose, and numerous footsteps approached from the right.

If they surround me, it's over. I have to peel them off and fight them one by one.

The dragon hid among the stalks of millet, leaping left and right at random. The number of footsteps coming behind her dwindled. Once she was sure that there was only one coati in direct pursuit, Tsukigake used her wings to make a sudden change in direction.

The moment the creature emerged from between the stalks and saw a dragon charging directly toward it, it stood up on its rear legs. Tsukigake bolted for its defenseless throat like an arrow and bit deep.

The taste of the fresh blood was not very pleasant. Perhaps now Tsuki would have a distaste for raw meat; but that was assuming she survived this encounter. The coati collapsed, unable to cry for help from the fangs in its throat.

It scrabbled desperately with its forelegs, sharp claws glinting, but Tsukigake grabbed its wrists to avoid being scratched—something dragons could do because their fingers were prehensile, like humans'. After ten seconds of biting, the coati's movements slowed, until the strength went out of its body at last.

Tsukigake let go of the perished creature and listened carefully. There was one set of footsteps rapidly approaching from the left. No time to hide, either.

The dragon went to lie down next to the dead coati and stopped moving. A moment later, a new coati burst through the row of stalks.

When it saw its companion collapsed on the ground due to its struggle with Tsukigake, it growled. As it approached, it sniffed, catching the odor of the dead coati's blood.

Either out of concern for its fellow or interest in devouring the corpse, the second coati took its attention off Tsukigake for a moment—enough time for the dragon to leap upward and bite its neck.

The play-dead method worked, but because it was coming from the side, Tsukigake couldn't actually grab it around the throat.

"Gyooo!" the coati howled, trying to shake off the dragon clinging to the right side of its neck. Tsukigake tried to grab the creature's arms like the last one, but it didn't work this time, and the flailing claws tore through the dragon's downy feathers to split the skin.

Blood spattered and mixed on the ground around the two creatures as they rolled, locked in combat. This was going to cost more life, but Tsukigake could not relax her grip now. The dragon jabbed her claws into her prey's throat and ripped downward with all her might.

That was the end of the second beast. It slumped to the ground, dead, and Tsukigake got unsteadily to her feet above the corpse.

The dragon examined her own body; there were countless claw marks from neck to chest. The violent rolling on the ground had tugged at the thorn wounds on her back, which now oozed fresh blood. And there were still three left to fight.

Now, drawn by the cries of the second coati, the others approached from three directions at once. Tsukigake didn't have enough energy to run around and thin them out again. She would have to fight them all together.

Seconds later, the coatis burst through the dead standing stalks. One of them was the leader, the first coati that had blocked their way. It was noticeably bigger than the other two.

The boss coati let out a ferocious roar when it saw the bodies of its two dead companions.

"Gruaaaaah!!"

Tsukigake didn't need to understand the will behind the cry to feel the intense fury contained in it. Determined to at least match them in ferocity, she summoned what strength she had left to growl back.

"Garurrrrrr!!"

Tsukigake had only been alive for little more than a year, but she was a dragon, the most powerful creature in the world. The coatis, which ran off a very crude algorithm, pulled back as they sensed a threat that went beyond life and priority value—but of course, they did not flee.

"Gaurr!!" the two smaller coatis barked, attacking from both sides.

The coati's weapons were a powerful jaw and claws. Tsukigake's main weapons were the same but with the addition of a strong and dexterous tail.

She lunged in, feinting at a bite, then rapidly rotated and smacked both of them with her tail. Her fancy tail feathers flew loose, but the coatis shrieked and flew sideways to crash into the line of stalks. Because the plants were withered, their outer husks were split and cracked, and the animals' bodies

caught on them, leaving them flailing helplessly in the air.

That hadn't been part of the plan, but it made clear that this was the final opportunity. Tsukigake leaped off the ground and charged at the boss coati head-on.

"Gwaa!"

The creature bared its fangs and bit. Tsukigake curved her long neck, trying to aim for the throat, but the enemy lifted its front legs to protect its weak point in a gesture that was surprisingly humanlike. Tsukigake's head lifted up on instinct, and her jaw clashed with her foe's. They bit down on each other, jaws and fangs interlocked.

Searing pain ran through Tsukigake's face. It was impossible to tell if the blood flooding into her mouth was the enemy's or her own. The only thing certain was that life was gushing out of both of them. Whichever ran out first would die.

To this point, Tsukigake had never experienced what it felt like to be close to death.

Her mother dragon, Akisomi, was still young, and she didn't take part in the war, so she hadn't seen human death up close. But catching living fish and eating them in the lake today was a shocking experience. Fish that swam and spun through the water, once trapped in Tsukigake's or Shimosaki's mouth, simply twitched once, then went completely still.

It was probably true, then, that many animals died like this to feed larger animals every day. The coatis hadn't attacked Tsukigake and the rat for fun. It was what they had to do to survive.

But Tsukigake wasn't going to give up and be someone else's food. Her master and brother were trapped in an underground dungeon—and the dark humans who'd captured them weren't doing it because they were hungry. It was for something worse, so they could hurt the ones Tsukigake cared about... perhaps even kill them. That couldn't happen.

Suddenly, Tsukigake felt something prickling the back of her throat. Deep inside her body, something hot was surging, swelling. It could not be contained.

With her jaw locked over the boss coati's mouth, Tsukigake unleashed that

heat. A great shower of sparks spilled over where their jaws met, singeing the fur of both animals. But the majority of the heat—the flames—flooded into the coati's body, dealing fatal damage.

"Gyau!" shrieked the lead coati, pulling away from Tsukigake's face and rolling on the ground, twitching and convulsing. Eventually, it stopped moving.

Tsukigake didn't know what she had done. She didn't know that she had emitted a dragon's greatest weapon, heat breath, or that it had a terrible life cost.

At that point, Tsukigake's life was less than a tenth of its maximum. And blood continued to drip from her back, chest, and face.

Still, the little dragon managed to rise and turn to face the other way.

The two smaller coatis stuck on the millet stalks had just gotten themselves free and hopped back down to the ground. The boss might be dead, but they weren't giving up yet. They growled, inching closer and closer.

Tsukigake didn't have the energy to growl back—only to keep her bloodied body upright. If she fell over, the two would leap upon her at once.

The dragon's vision was darkening. Her limbs were heavy and weak. But she couldn't fall over. Not yet. Not until she reached the town and called for help.

She thought she heard a sound.

The coatis looked up to the sky. Tsukigake's bloody face rose as well.

Very high in the sunset-darkened sky, something was flying in a direct line. It wasn't a bird. It wasn't a dragon. It was something like a star, roaring like a gust of wind and emitting green light.

I've never seen that before—but I know what it is.

Moved by a strange feeling she didn't fully understand, Tsukigake began to howl.

It produced no vocalization at all, but the star changed course, as though it heard her loud and clear.

How many minutes—how many hours had passed?

Without a window to look out, being stuck underground where no bells from Centoria could reach, there was no way to know the present time of day. The swordsman delegate always said he wanted to produce a clock that could be carried around, and while he'd been working on that with arsenal-master Sadore, they were far from being finished.

Each time she heard that, Ronie thought, *The bells always tell us the exact time, so what would be the point of carrying such an item around?* But now that she was in this situation, she had to admit there was a point to it after all.

Plus, the thousands of bells across the human realm all played a melody called “By the Light of Solus.” It was a beautiful song, but knowing that the history of the Axiom Church was full of so much falsehood made it much more difficult for Ronie to get into that worshipful mood whenever she heard the hymn play now.

The arts, such as music, painting, sculpture, and poetry, were still strictly controlled by the Taboo Index. Only those given the callings to make them could proceed down the creative path, and the imperial government had to assess a finished work before it could be unveiled. If the content of the art had any hint of negative sentiment toward the genesis legend or the Axiom Church, or was aiming for too vulgar or amusing an effect, they would not be approved.

The swordsman delegate wanted to eliminate that standard's body immediately, but there were countering votes on the Unification Council—chief among them being Nergius—so it hadn't happened yet. Ronie found this to be a tricky topic, but she hoped that someday people could sing what they wanted—and paint and write the stories they wanted, without being tied to their callings.

But in order to see that world become a reality, she needed to escape this

place alive.

While she was gathering her resolve, a voice that was the utter opposite grumbled, “Ugh, it’s no good...”

Tiese had been attempting to open the lock using Incarnation, but now she was lying flat on her back on the ground.

“And Kirito opened it just like *that*...”

The situation was perilous and not a joke, but Ronie couldn’t help chuckling at her friend. “C’mon, you know you can’t just repeat what he does like it’s easy.”

“Yeah, I know...How about you?” Tiese whispered back. Ronie said nothing.

While her partner was attempting to unlock their cell door, Ronie was studying the wall of the underground prison, but she did not find the hidden door she was hoping for—or even any sections that might be easier to destroy. The blocks were made of Norlangarth’s special granite, placed without even a single milice gap between them. An apprentice knight couldn’t pull them loose in silence, and if they tried to destroy any part of the wall or bars with force, the sound would reach the mansion above.

Tiese sat up at last and wrapped her arms around her knees. “Shimosaki’s okay, right?” she murmured.

It was the fourth time she’d asked that. But Ronie knelt next to her friend, rubbed her back gently, and said, “He’s just fine. You’ll see him very soon.”

Tiese nodded silently. As she continued to rub, Ronie herself was secretly worried about Tsukigake.

Between the mansion and the gate to Centoria, it was mostly flat grassland with a few features here and there and the private imperial plantation. She didn’t think any animals that would attack a baby dragon lived there, but to be fair, Ronie didn’t know that much about the estate. There was no denying the possibility of unexpected danger, but for now, all Ronie could do was pray that Tsukigake made the trip safely.

Gods above...

She knew that the celestial realm beyond the clouds and the gods said to

dwell there did not truly exist, but Ronie prayed to them anyway.

...Please give your protection to Tsukigake and Shimosaki.

She heard no reply.

The only sound was that of heavy rocks scraping together.

The left end of the lantern-lit hallway began to part, and the thick stone wall slowly rose. Ronie and Tiese shot to their feet and backed against the rear wall. The goblins in the adjacent cell croaked and shrieked.

From the darkness beyond the hidden door came the figure of the robed man that Emperor Cruiga called Zeppos, as smoothly as ink spilled from the black void.

The key ring in his right hand jangled as he stepped into the hallway and came to a stop before Ronie and Tiese's cell. He peered in with a creaky motion, staring closely at the two girls, then straightened up again without a word. After that, he took a few more steps down the hall and stopped before the adjacent cell.

It was probably just a routine patrol, but Ronie carefully approached the iron bars to watch him. He had selected a key from his ring and was just placing it into the lock.

The cold, hard *click* it made was followed by more shrieking from the goblins. The man opened the door anyway and, in a strangely twisted voice, said, "You three. Out of the cage."

Instantly, their shrieking stopped. Then a whispery voice asked, "Are you... letting us out?"

Three seconds later, Zeppos said, "Yes."

Ronie could sense it was a lie. The pause was suspicious, and they'd gone to great lengths to abduct these goblins from the inn in South Centoria. They weren't just going to release them now.

But the goblins walked out of the cell without any apparent doubt about his words.

"Walk past that door," said Zeppos, pointing not to the exit down the right

side of the passageway that led to the surface but to the hidden doorway on the left. The three began to walk, Zeppos following them to block their escape route.

When he started to pass the iron bars, Ronie was unable to help herself. “What are you going to do with those people?”

The goblins came to a stop, apparently completely trusting that they were about to be freed, and looked at Ronie and Tiese with gazes of confusion and apology. Behind them, Zeppos barked with laughter.

“Keh-heh...‘people,’ you call them.”

“What’s so funny?” demanded Tiese. Zeppos twisted forward to peer into the cell again. His grin had vanished.

“Once a goblin, always a goblin—no matter how much the world changes.”

Those words sounded somehow familiar to Ronie. But before she could place the memory, Zeppos straightened and barked an order to his prisoners: “Now walk. Go up the stairs, and I’ll let you outside.”

The goblins resumed their march, and Zeppos followed them into the darkness of the hidden door. Four sets of footsteps went up the stone stairs and faded. Lastly, there was a wooden creaking, and silence returned to the cells.

“.....He’s not actually releasing them...is he?” Tiese whispered. Ronie had to agree.

“I think...they finished preparing for something. I don’t know what it is...but I’m sure it’s going to involve doing something to those poor goblins,” she whispered.

Tiese bit her lip, her expression worried. “Kirito said the kidnappers might commit another murder in Centoria and frame the kidnapped goblins for the act. If that’s true...then some innocent soul in Centoria is going to die again.”

“.....Yes.”

Ronie’s mind raced. If her partner’s conjecture was correct, the kidnappers—Emperor Cruiga and Zeppos—would commit another atrocity. But who would they kill—and where?

Kirito had said something else, too. If the killer was able to murder Yazen in violation of the Taboo Index, and it was because he was a former serf of the private estate, then other serfs might be equally vulnerable.

He had come to that conclusion because Asuna had been able to hear the killer's voice through past-scrying. The words the killer had said just before killing Yazen:

Once a serf, always a serf. If you don't like that, then die right here and now!

".....Ah!"

The sound of Zeppos's voice, still fresh from just a few minutes ago, flooded Ronie's mind.

Once a goblin, always a goblin.

Aside from the subject, it was the exact same phrase.

That was it. It was far too weak to be a certainty and didn't indicate any kind of causality. But Ronie had absolute belief that her intuition was correct in this case.

"...That man...Zeppos. He's the one who killed Yazen at the inn," she said, her voice quivering. Tiese bobbed her head decisively, expression firm; she had come to the same conclusion.

"Yes...I get that feeling, too. I don't know how much of the Taboo Index he can break, but it's clear he's going to use the goblins to do something that's much worse than what happened with Yazen. We have to stop him."

"Yes..."

Ronie stared at the darkness beyond the hidden doorway on the other side of the bars. The door had not yet been returned to its closed position.

She didn't know the precise time, but if all was going well, Tsukigake should be reaching the gate of Centoria by now. Sadly, she couldn't speak human language. How many minutes would it take for the guards at the gate to notice that Tsukigake was a dragon hatchling, send a messenger to the cathedral, and deliver a report to Kirito or Asuna or one of the Integrity Knights so that someone could come here to the private estate to save them...?

And the carriage that Ronie and Tiese took to get here was still at the east side of the lake. Even the swordsman delegate wouldn't be able to guess that they were actually deep in the woods on the *west* side of the lake and trapped in a dungeon beneath the mansion there. They'd have to hope that Tsukigake would be with the rescue team, but that would all take time, so even if all went as smoothly as possible, they ought to assume help wouldn't arrive for another hour, at least.

It was too optimistic to believe nothing would happen to the goblins that had been taken upstairs before then. The girls needed to do something right now, or it would be too late.

But it was impossible to break their iron bars quietly, and it remained to be seen if they could accomplish it at all. Plus, succeed or fail, the sounds of the attempt would surely reach the mansion, where the emperor and his crony would hear. Such a thing could spell disaster for their hostage, Shimosaki.

What can we do? What is the best plan...?

Ronie squeezed her eyes shut, with no clear answer coming to mind.

She'd felt this awful feeling just one week earlier. It was when she'd visited Obsidia Palace in the Dark Territory with Kirito, when Ambassador Sheyta and Commander Iskahn's daughter Leazetta was kidnapped, with the demand for her release being the public execution of Kirito. If they didn't do what was demanded, Leazetta's life would have been taken.

As the time limit approached, Ronie had lost her cool. In Kirito's presence, she had claimed that if he was to choose his own execution, she would demand to receive the same fate right next to him.

And in response, Kirito had said, *I won't give up. I'll find a way to rescue Leazetta...and I'll return to the cathedral with you. That's our home.*

He was right. She couldn't give up. She had to think for all she was worth. What was something she could do here on her own, without waiting for Tsukigake to make everything succeed? There had to be a way to avoid losing either the goblins or her dragon.

"Tiese...", Ronie murmured, right at the same moment her best friend said,

“Let’s break the bars.”

“Huh...?”

That had been her last resort, not the first thing she expected to hear. Ronie shook her head and protested, “B-but if they hear us up there, Shimosaki will be —”

However, Tiese’s lips pursed, as though she expected that rebuttal. She looked up at the ceiling of the underground cell.

“...I don’t think there are that many people in this mansion. Probably just the emperor and Zeppos...Otherwise, there’s no reason the emperor himself would risk danger to appear before us.”

It was true that, earlier, Emperor Cruiga had acted as a decoy, drawing the girls’ attention until Zeppos could sneak up from behind and capture Shimosaki. If there were other followers, they would be the ones left to be the distraction.

“Yeah...that might be true, but...”

“I think if it’s just two of them, we can get Shimosaki back safely if we catch them off guard. Fortunately, they’ve probably left our swords just beyond the hidden door.”

“...”

Ronie stared at the darkness beyond the doorway again. When they dropped their swords on the ground, Emperor Cruiga kicked them through the doorway, but there hadn’t been any sign of them being carried upstairs. If they could escape from the cell, there was a good chance they’d have their swords back.

If she had her sword, she knew she could win the fight, whether that was the true emperor or not. The real concern was Shimosaki. Even if it was only the two men up there, they should at least know ahead of time where the dragon was being kept if they were going to stage a surprise rescue, as Tiese suggested.

“Tiese,” Ronie said, lifting her hands up to her friend, “give me your hands.”

“Huh...?” She reached out, not understanding, and squeezed them.

“We might not be able to open the lock with Incarnation, but we *can* use Incarnation to pick up a signal,” Ronie said. Tiese’s maple-red eyes widened.

In their Incarnation training, the power to affect other things was actually equal in importance to the power to *sense* things. Their difficult meditation lessons were meant to develop that part of Incarnation. They would sit in the training hall, eyes closed, and extinguish their thoughts, expanding their ability to perceive the world through the realm of imagination.

Kirito, who had the greatest Incarnation power in the world, said he could sense a dragon from a distance of ten kilors, but for the girls, it wasn't even a surefire guarantee that they could sense a person in the same room. Now they were trying to do it through the thick stone ceiling. It was a reckless attempt, but that was the only method they had for identifying the little dragon's location.

Tiese started to say something, probably thinking the same thing, but then she clamped her mouth shut. She pulled a firmer grip on Ronie's hands and closed her eyes.

Ronie did the same and breathed in the cold air of the underground cell. Across from her, Tiese inhaled, held it for a second, then slowly exhaled.

Incarnation was an individual power, but by holding hands and matching breathing, the law of unity in body and spirit allowed for it to be amplified over multiple people. It was a very advanced technique, and even with Tiese, whom she knew so well, they'd only succeeded at it a few times before. But one person's Incarnation probably wasn't going to be enough to probe through the ceiling.

With each breath, their respiration rates grew closer to synchronization. The sensation of touching skin melted into one, so neither could tell where her own hand ended and the other's began. The boundary between self and external world faded, ever so slowly, and their senses expanded...

There were three auras directly above the basement cell. They seemed to be lying down side by side. That had to be the trio of mountain goblins.

A bit farther away were two more presences. They felt unbearably cold, too much so to be living humans, but they undoubtedly belonged to Emperor Cruiga and Zeppos.

And in a corner of the same room was a small but very warm aura. As soon as

they sensed that, Tiese's breathing went out of sync. The combination of their Incarnation wavered briefly, then stabilized. They could feel Shimosaki's worry and loneliness, but he didn't seem to be badly hurt.

Then they expanded their range. It gave them a broad understanding of the mansion's layout. It lived up to the reputation of an imperial villa, as there were many rooms on the first and second floor, but aside from the large chamber where the five people and Shimosaki were found, they did not sense any other inhabitants.

If they went up the stairs behind the hidden door, they'd be in what seemed to be a storeroom on the ground floor. If they went down the hallway from there, the door to the great hall was just five mels away. If they ran at top speed, they could get there in fifteen—maybe even ten seconds.

Ronie and Tiese opened their eyes and stared at each other.

There was no need for words. They let go and turned toward the bars.

The iron was very tough, probably extremely difficult to destroy with their bare hands, but they still had their empty sword sheaths. The sheaths' priority levels were far below that of their swords, but they were probably still tough enough to withstand a single swing.

"...Hey, do you remember the story of how Eugeo and Kirito escaped the prison beneath Central Cathedral?" Tiese whispered, to Ronie's surprise.

"Of course. They cut the metal chains and used them to break the bars."

"At the time they told us, I thought it sounded so reckless...Who would have guessed that we'd one day be trying to do the same thing?"

"Not me, that's for sure," said Ronie, grinning briefly. Then she removed her empty sheath from her sword belt's fastener, moved it to her right hand, and held it up in a vertical stance. Tiese prepared herself in the exact same manner.

They didn't know what the emperor and Zeppos were doing to the goblins upstairs in the great hall. But once they engaged in the next step, they couldn't afford to lose a single second to hesitation.

...I'm sorry, Ronie said silently to her sheath, sucking in a sharp breath.

She couldn't use one of her techniques with the sheath itself, but she launched herself as if to do it anyway.

"Haaaah!!"

"Yaaaa!!"

The two burst forward with fierce shouts, swinging their empty sheaths downward in the form of the Norkia-style Lightning Slash, also known as the Aincrad-style Vertical.

The wood-and-leather sheaths seemed to take on faint-blue glows, which was surely a trick of the eye. The two sheaths made contact with the steel bars and shattered with a tremendous smashing sound.

But a moment later, the set of bars, two mels tall and four mels wide, bent in two different places and came loose from where they met stone, flying to the far side of the hallway. The entire underground passage thundered.

Let's go! was Tiese's silent message.

Ten seconds! Ronie thought back, leaping into the hallway.

They rushed through the open doorway and found themselves in a small storage room. There were leather straps on the right wall that looked like restraints and an assortment of oddly shaped blades and glass containers on the left. It was clear what these tools were used for, but they pushed that thought out of mind and scanned the floor by the weak light coming into the room behind them.

Ronie's Moonbeam Sword and Tiese's standard-issue sword were tossed into the corner of the room as if they were just sticks. Ronie spotted them first and scooped up her sword in one hand and Tiese's in the other, tossing it to her partner.

Three seconds had passed.

A stone staircase led up from the wall straight ahead of them. They leaped up the stairs, skipping five at a time, blades in hand.

Ronie kicked open the door at the top, putting them in a larger storage space. The windows faced north, but there was plenty of sunset light streaming

through them, making it much brighter than the underground chamber. The many display shelves and armor racks lining the floor and walls were entirely empty. When the mansion had been placed off-limits, all the treasures within had surely been carried out. Turning to look at the door she'd kicked open, Ronie saw that it was fashioned to look like a large shelving unit and would have been difficult to spot from this side.

Seven seconds had passed.

The real doors out of the room were to the west and south. They'd learned the general layout of the mansion from their invocation, so they rushed straight for the western door and kicked it open, too.

The blow was so forceful that it broke the hinges, causing the door to smash against the wall on the other side. They rushed through it into a long, opulent hallway that went left and right. The red wallpaper was decorated with lilies and hawks.

Fifteen paces down the left side of the corridor, the entrance to the great hall stood on the right.

Eight seconds. Nine.

Using every bit of her knight's strength, Ronie charged down the hallway in two seconds and delivered a backspin kick to the center of the huge double doors. It didn't smash them off their hinges, of course, but they shot open with nearly enough force to break them, revealing what lay beyond.

Ten seconds.

The vast room took up an entire third of the first floor of the mansion. It was gloomy inside; black curtains covered all the windows on the south side. But it wasn't entirely dark, because ten or twenty candles burned near the center of the space.

The candles were arranged in a circle about two paces in diameter, within which the goblins were laid. One black figure stood just outside the circle, engaged in chanting some kind of art. It was clear something bad was in progress, but there was a more pressing priority at the moment.

Ronie looked around, wide-eyed, and spotted a sack in the far left corner of

the hall—and a second dark figure starting to run toward it.

That shadow had to be Zeppos. They didn't need to think twice about what was in the sack.

Tiese! Ronie shouted in her mind, thrusting out her left hand.

Tiese joined her, lifting her hand—transferring her sword to the left—to cross over Ronie's.

“System Call! Generate Thermal Element!” Tiese chanted, as Ronie added, “Form Element! Arrow Shape!”

The five heat elements Tiese created were instantly transformed into five arrows by Ronie's art. This synchronized casting was a high-level technique for halving the execution time. Tiese and Ronie were only apprentice knights, but they'd been practicing this long before that, when they were primary trainees at the academy. That was why they had a small chance of pulling off advanced abilities like Body-Spirit Unity and Synchronized Casting, which even proper knights found difficult.

It took just two seconds for them to finish preparing the art, and they spoke the final command together.

““Discharge!!””

Five brilliant lights cut through the darkness.

The flaming arrows roared toward the black-robed figure, who leaped out of the way with inhuman agility. The arrows hit the wall one after the other, causing little explosions.

“Go, Tiese!” Ronie shouted, controlling the final two arrows with Incarnation.

Hands free, Tiese charged for the linen sack. Ronie curved the path of the remaining fire arrows to chase Zeppos and push him farther away.

The fourth arrow missed as well. But the fifth one caught his flapping robe, lighting it on fire.

Zeppos silently tossed off the robe and retreated farther. Tiese reached the sack at that point and sliced the tightly wound rope with her sword.

“Shimosaki!” she shrieked, sticking her hand into the sack. The juvenile dragon was out of it; some of his pale-blue feathers had fallen out from rough treatment. But once clutched to his master’s chest, he crooned softly. “Krrrr...”

Ronie was relieved but also worried about Tsukigake’s late return. Both emotions flooded her at once, but she pushed them down and shouted, “Tiese, take Shimosaki outside! Leave this to me!”

“But...?!” her partner protested.

“Go!” she insisted.

To rescue the apparently unconscious goblins, battle with Zeppos and the eerily chanting emperor was unavoidable. Tiese couldn’t fight carrying the dragon, and if their adversaries managed to capture him again, the girls would probably never get him back.

“...All right! I’ll be right back!” Tiese shouted, swinging her sword in a flat line. A nearby curtain split, and the glass behind it shattered tremendously.



Red light flooded into the hall now that a rectangle had been cut out of the darkness. Zeppos backed away farther without his robe, as if afraid of Solus's power.

Beneath his robe, he'd been wearing what looked like restraints. Leather belts covered in studs wrapped around his rail-thin limbs and torso, and at first glance, it was impossible to tell if it was supposed to be armor or some kind of punishment.

And even the flesh peeking through the leather strips was an unnatural color. It was unclear, just from the reflected light of the sunset, but it appeared to be bluish gray—not something you would associate with living human flesh.

I feel like I've seen that color before, Ronie realized as Tiese jumped through the broken window and escaped into the front yard of the building. She ran out into the woods nearby to find a safe place to hide Shimosaki.

Until her partner returned, it would be a two-on-one fight. She couldn't try to take on too much, but she was worried about the goblins on the floor and the unsettlingly long art that Emperor Cruiga was reciting.

She listened to his hoarse voice but did not understand a single word of what he was saying. Whatever it was, it wasn't going to be pleasant when he was finished.

With the point of her sword directed at Zeppos, Ronie started to generate a fresh heat element for the purpose of stopping the emperor's cast.

But first, without a sound, Zeppos unsheathed two daggers from the leather belts around his thighs. The one in his right hand was slightly larger, but the one in the left was smeared with a green substance.

The left was the poisoned knife used to threaten Shimosaki in the dungeon.

And the right was probably the knife that took Yazen's life.

Zeppos made his way closer, circling around the candles in the center of the room. As he passed through the light left by the now-bare window, it illuminated a face that had been hidden up till now.

There wasn't a single thread of hair on his head. His long, narrow face, like the

rest of his body, was blue, and his eyes glittered with extremely small pupils. She didn't recognize his features.

"You got out of that cell much earlier than I expected, girl," Zeppos rasped, his lifeless mouth twisting.

"Expected...? Then...you left the hidden door raised on purpose?" Ronie replied.

The skinny man gave her a thin smile. "But of course. As the Norlangarth family's grand chamberlain, I would never be careless enough to simply *forget* to close a door."

"Chamberlain...?!" Ronie gasped. Zeppos's smile deepened.

Before and after the battle at the palace, Ronie had never met the grand chamberlain of the Norlangarth Empire, so of course she wouldn't recognize him. But Ronie *did* know what had happened to him: In the meeting after the suppression of the rebellion, General Serlut, leader of the Human Guardian Army, had made an announcement that she still remembered vividly.

"The imperial grand chamberlain...is dead. I heard that he resisted surrender, just like the nobility's officers, and was killed by the army."

"That was my duty and my pleasure. I would die and come back to life as many times as His Imperial Majesty requires me," Zeppos announced, crossing his arms over his chest, knives at the ready. He glanced briefly at the robed man standing in the center of the great hall.

Speaking of people who were supposed to be dead, Emperor Cruiga Norlangarth continued with his eerie chanting. And unlike Zeppos's case, Ronie herself had been responsible for ending the emperor's life. She could still feel the sensation of her sword driving deep into the man's chest.

If these two were not impostors, then as Zeppos said, they had come back to life. But Kirito, who had the strongest Incarnation of the entire human world; Asuna, who wielded the godly power of Stacia; and Ayuha Furia, leader of the sacred artificers brigade—even the half-god Administrator, who ruled the world for over three hundred years—could not achieve the feat of resurrecting the dead. They couldn't have really come back to life. There had to be some trick...

some evil mechanism that Ronie couldn't even imagine.

Sensing something in Ronie's expression, Zeppos uncrossed his arms and said, "I left the door to the basement open to lure you up here, naturally. You'll be the perfect combat training partner for the goblins, but they can't get through that little passageway, of course..."

"Combat training...? Can't get through...?" she repeated, her voice hoarse. She threw a glance at the goblins lying down in the circle of candles. They were very clearly smaller than Zeppos and the emperor—and even Ronie. And there had been no problem with taking them out of the cell in the first place.

It defied all understanding, but there was one thing she knew for certain. She had to stop that sacred art as soon as possible. And the first step in doing that was eliminating Zeppos.

"...I've heard enough chitchat," Ronie announced. "If you've come back from the dead, I'll just send you back to the depths of hell!" Bracing herself, she brandished her weapon.

Zeppos carried a blade in each hand. That meant he couldn't use sacred arts. But *she* could—and she was going to immobilize him, then close the gap and cut him in two.

"System Call! Generate Thermal Element!" As fast as possible, she recited the element generation that Tiese had handled moments earlier and called forth five heat elements. Zeppos bolted forward, daggers at the ready. He probably thought that without their synchronized casting he was faster—but this was Ronie's trap.

She kept the elements floating where she'd generated them, then leaped back and shouted, "Discharge!!"

The unrefined heat elements released their stored power, exploding with a tremendous blast.

Processed elements were needed in attacking arts to actually strike a target. Arrow Shape prioritized directional accuracy and puncturing power. Bird Shape was good at tracking a moving object. There were other commands with other effects, as well—but none of them were necessary if the enemy was going to

rush right into the element anyway. Simply discharging them was good enough.

Just as Ronie hoped, Zeppos wound up right in the midst of the explosion. Those leather straps that could barely be called armor weren't going to help him. Heat arts were basic, but five elements at once packed enough power that even a young and hardy soldier could easily perish.

Even if he was still alive, he would be immobilized. This was her chance!

"Haaah!" she screamed, raising the Moonbeam Sword as she burst through the black smoke floating in the air.

Kchiiing! There was an earsplitting rattle, and her sword came to a stop, a shock running from her wrist up through her shoulder.

"...?!"

To Ronie's amazement, Zeppos emerged through the thinning smoke.

Most of the leather straps were burned and charred—and torn through at several points. His right breast was the most damaged part, where the tattered leather dangled loosely, revealing a hole deep enough to fit two entire fists inside.

But that was it. There was not a drop of blood, and the larger knife that his right hand held above his head was firmly blocking Ronie's sword.

It was impossible. How could he be standing, with a hole in his chest deep enough to crush a lung as well as his heart? A member of the Integrity Knighthood had swung her Divine Object weapon at full strength. How could a chamberlain, not even a guard, block it one-handed?

Zeppos smiled, right into her face.

She jumped backward again, trying to evade the small blade, its sharp point glowing that awful green. But it wasn't in time. The knife slid through space like a green snake and into her vicinity. The edge of her cloak ripped without a sound.

Shunk!

She heard a wet, nasty sound.

But it originated from a silver piece of metal that came flying from behind her back—probably a stake made from steel elements—piercing deep through Zeppos’s stomach.

“Ronie!”

It was Tiese, jumping back through the broken window, standard-issue sword drawn.

“Get away from him!”

She obeyed her partner’s voice and jumped backward again, away from the poisoned knife that had stopped just milices away from her solar plexus. Zeppos tried to follow, no longer smiling, but then Tiese shouted, “Discharge!!”

A second stake came roaring closer, hitting Zeppos in the back and piercing through him, until the pointed end was visible through the front of his chest. Blackened blood sprayed from his mouth.

Surely he was dead this time. No human being could survive being pierced through the heart by a three-cen-wide stake. Certain of their victory, Ronie planted her feet and raised her sword to deliver the final blow.

“No! He’s still moving!” Tiese called out.

If she hadn’t, Ronie’s head might have been cut clean off by the light-speed slash from Zeppos’s knife.

“Wha...?”

She whipped her upper half as far back as she could, stunned. The dull metal blade passed by her neck close enough that she could feel the air from it.

The strike missing, Zeppos retreated with awkward steps—he wasn’t dead, but he wasn’t unscathed, either. He stopped near the center of the great hall and stretched out his weaponized arms, as if to protect the circle of candles.

Tiese used that moment to cross the hall and run to Ronie’s side. She pointed her sword at Zeppos and shouted, “He’s not human, Ronie!”

“Huh...? What do you mean...?” she stammered.

Tiese glanced back at the broken window she’d just jumped through, then

forward again. “In the woods, I found a huge pile of those sacks. They were all filled with soil...nasty-smelling clay.”

“Clay...?”

The mention of that word caused something in Ronie’s mind to flash.

Zeppos’s grayish skin. The body that was only dented in by the fiery blast. The dark, blackened blood.

Ronie had seen something with the same properties at Obsidia Palace in the Dark Territory. It wasn’t a human. It was a gigantic monster that appeared in the treasure repository...

“.....A minion!” she moaned. Tiese nodded, and Zeppos’s black-stained lips grinned.

Minions. Artificial life that only the dark mages of the Dark Territory could manufacture. They only received simple orders, but their large bodies contained massive life and were very resistant to heat and cold. If Zeppos was a minion made of clay, rather than a person, that would explain why his chest merely dented inward when hit with five heat elements.

But that just raised new questions.

“Minions...are mindless monsters that can’t talk. But he...,” she cried.

Then Zeppos spoke, his voice rumbling and difficult to discern with the steel-element stakes through his stomach and chest.

“The Axiom Church...were not the only people...studying sacred arts... Emperor Cruiga—in fact, all four imperial dynasties, they of the oldest and most regal blood, have been performing endless research for centuries, all to complete one very special art...”

“All four imperial dynasties...together?!” Tiese gasped.

Ronie was just as shocked. As a member of a lower noble family in Norlangarth, Ronie had long felt that the other three empires were such distant entities, they might as well not even exist. The idea that she could simply fly over the Everlasting Walls, which felt like the very end of the world, was something she didn’t come to appreciate until after she took part in the

Otherworld War.

But Zeppos was saying that the emperors of the four empires had been cooperating on research of sacred arts for *centuries*. It was a shocking revelation, but upon further reflection, it wasn't impossible. Even under the pontifex's rule, a travel pass would allow its bearer to pass through the Everlasting Walls, and the four imperial palaces that surrounded the cathedral were, in fact, less than a kilor apart if viewed from above the walls. The actual emperors might not pass through them, but their agents certainly could. Someone like, say, a grand chamberlain...

"What kind of sacred art is that?!" Tiese demanded.

Zeppos just leered at her eerily. "*Geh-heh-heh-heh...* If you still can't tell at this point, you truly are stupid girls. It should be obvious...I speak of the godly power the pontifex monopolized, the art that confers eternal life..."

"Eternal..."

"Life?!"

Ronie and Tiese were stunned into inaction. Zeppos, meanwhile, shivered with injured delight and framed his narrow head with the knives he held.

"*Geh-heh-heh...* We used every art, every drug, even virulent poisons, to experiment with the process of stopping the natural decrease of life. And the laboratory for our experiments was the underground cells where we held you. All the serfs who died in those cells gave their lives to a great and honorable purpose," he confessed, his horrifying admission adorned by grating cackles. The deep, searing hatred and envy contained in his voice and gaze weighed heavily on Ronie's mind.

The imperial family's grand chamberlain had status and power equivalent to that of the highest nobles. Why would such a man feel envious of two mere apprentice knights...? Then she gasped.

Zeppos wasn't jealous of Tiese and Ronie personally. He was jealous of the very concept of the Integrity Knights. The undying souls whose lives were frozen, such that they lived for an eternity...

The emperors and high nobles enjoyed every privilege and luxury a human

being could possess, but eternal life was the one thing that remained forever out of their grasp. How they must have stared up at the towering white structure that loomed over their own palaces, cursing and envying the pontifex and her Integrity Knights. And because the Taboo Index forced their loyalty and obedience to the Axiom Church, even the emperors could not make their resistance known.

But the Integrity Knights suffered in their own way. Ronie learned this when she joined the cathedral.

Those whose lives were frozen were fated to repeatedly say good-bye to those whose lives were not. Even Commander Fanatio. She was undying, having lived over two hundred years, but her son Berche was not the same as her. So long as no one resurrected the life-freezing art that died with Administrator—and so long as she did not implement that procedure on Berche—her son would age and die before his mother did. It was an unbearably cruel fate for both mother and son.

“Eternal life goes against all the rules of nature,” Ronie declared, desperately trying to keep her voice under control. “You’ve killed so many innocent people in search of a thing that should not be...It’s unforgivable.”

Zeppos’s artificial face twisted with rage. “You accursed knights,” he spat, spraying black blood from his lips. “You don’t have the *right* to speak those words.”

If Zeppos was a minion, as Tiese suspected, there was no guessing how his body worked exactly. He had huge stakes through his chest and stomach and was still alive, so he clearly wasn’t human, but that didn’t mean he was simply clay in human shape. For one thing, there was clearly blood flowing through his body, so perhaps if he lost it all, he would finally die. His form was much smaller than a true minion, so he must have much less blood, too.

Of the three minions they faced at Obsidia Palace, two had been punched to dust by Commander Iskahn, and the third was split down the center of its brain by Ambassador Sheyta’s chop. Inflicting that kind of damage might not be possible at Ronie’s and Tiese’s level of skill, but if they could avoid his knives and cut off an arm or a leg, they could win.

The real problem was the man Zeppos was protecting with his life: Emperor Cruiga. Over three minutes had passed since they barged into the great hall, but his chanting continued. The longer the recitation, the more complex and powerful the effects of a sacred art—and Ronie knew of no art that lasted this long. Asuna's command for past-screaming felt very long, but even that was only about two minutes.

They couldn't let the fight with Zeppos drag on. No waiting for him to die of blood loss; just finish him off as soon as possible so they could stop the emperor's art.

"Tiese, when I execute my technique, you stop him with light elements," Ronie whispered to her partner.

The two girls' abilities with the sword, sacred arts, and Incarnation were even. In her heart, Tiese probably didn't want to put all the danger directly on Ronie's shoulders—but there was one area where a significant difference of power existed between them. Tiese's standard-issue army sword had a priority level of 25, while Ronie's Moonbeam Sword was at 39. It had to be Ronie who slashed him.

"You're right that the Integrity Knights and Axiom Church may not have absolute rights," Ronie shouted, brandishing her sword above her head, "but we're always striving to *be* right and just, and no matter what anyone says, what you're doing is evil!"

As though taking on its master's will, the sword began to glow bright blue. When Tiese spoke the command of creation, she raced forward, pushing herself off the ground.

Invisible wings beat on her back, slamming forward with great force. In an instant, she had crossed over ten miles of distance toward the enemy. It was the Aincrad style's ultra-speed charge technique, Sonic Leap.

"You will be fodder for our great ambitions, too, girl!!" Zeppos shouted, baring yellow teeth as sharp as fangs. He spun his knives to hold them backhand and prepared to meet her in combat.

White light enveloped his fierce features.

There were three sharp bursts in a row—Tiese’s light bullets had shot past Ronie in the air.

Light-based arts were not as powerful as heat or frost, but they featured overwhelming speed and accuracy—ideal for blinding targets. It was also the opposing element of the dark-built minion, so it would deal some extra damage in that regard, too.

Purple smoke began to sizzle from where the fierce light burned Zeppos’s face. He stopped only for a brief instant, but it was enough for Ronie. Her blue glow raced on a slant between the knives he was lowering.

The Moonbeam Sword cut deep through the former chamberlain’s right shoulder and through his left side. Zeppos froze in position with his hands near his waist, mouth open in a croak.

“...Emper...or...Crui...gaaa.....”

The top half of his skinny body slid downward to the left and fell onto the carpet with a dull thud. A moment later, his lower half slumped to its knees.

Ronie had to jump out of the way of the spray of black blood that shot from the two halves of the man’s flesh.

The certainty that *this time* they had won threatened to flood her body with relief, but the battle was not over. They had to defeat Emperor Cruiga before he finished his sacred art.

Before her eyes was a ring of silent, flickering candles. In the middle were three goblins on the ground, eyes closed. And beyond them, a man in a black robe, his arms held high, in the midst of fervent recitation...

If the revived emperor was also a minion, then no half measures would defeat him. Like Zeppos, they would need to cut his body in half or cut off his head.

Summoning all her willpower, Ronie took a stance to perform another sword technique.

And in the next moment, several things happened at once.

“Ronie!!” Tiese screamed.

“Fulfill your duty, Zeppos!” thundered the emperor, pausing in his recitation.

Gahk! A shock ran through Ronie's right foot.

A moment later, severe pain shot through her body and into her mind. She looked down and saw Zeppos's head and left arm stabbing its knife deep into the top of her foot. The blade was mottled green.

She gritted her teeth as severe numbness followed the pain. She had to do something before the poison made its way all through her body, but there were a number of different arts for neutralizing poison, and she couldn't tell which one to use without knowing the type of poison.

"Rrgh!" Ronie growled, slicing off Zeppos's arm with her sword. Then she used the tip against the hilt of the poisoned knife to pull it from her foot. The blood that spurted from the wound was already looking blacker.

In an attempt to slow the spread of the poison, Ronie generated five light elements, then used her sword to cut deep into the flesh above her right knee. More blood gushed out, but the color was still slightly reddish. She seeped the light elements into the wound and executed Mist Shape to diffuse them into her bloodstream.

The light elements would neutralize the poison to a degree, but to entirely purify the toxins, she needed to use a special art that involved the medicinal herbs in the pouch she carried on her waist. She'd just have to try all the curing arts she knew, one after the other.

She reached back to open the bag with her left hand, but her fingers were already losing sensation, and she couldn't undo the leather drawstring. The strength was going out of her left leg just as it did for the wounded right one, and her body toppled over.

"Ronie!" shouted Tiese, who came running up to support Ronie as she fell. Wasting no time, she swung her sword at what remained of Zeppos on the floor, slicing straight through his head where it still writhed.

In addition to the dull sound of a claylike substance being split, there was a sharp metallic clang. Zeppos was cut in two from brain to jaw. This time, his life was truly extinguished; the pieces lost their shape and melted into a sludge. The lower half of his body nearby turned into black phlegm that spread across the floor and began to evaporate.

Where Zeppos's head had vanished was a strange object. It was a silver disc fashioned to look like a lily petal and a hawk feather—the special insignia given to those who served the Norlangarth Empire. The petal and feather were reserved for the highest honors.

The disc was split perfectly in two, broken by Tiese's sword. Purple smoke was rising from the crack, issuing a faint sound like a wailing scream.

That was the core of the mystery—of how Zeppos and the emperor were back as minions, when they should be dead. There was probably—no, definitely—the same thing inside the emperor's head that related to him in the same way, giving his clay body a personality and a memory.

"Tie...se...", Ronie mumbled, even her lips starting to lose their ability to move.

Cut the emperor's head. That's how you beat him.

But she couldn't speak the words. Tiese was holding her up with one hand, sword jammed into the floor, and rummaging through her own bag. She was prioritizing Ronie's antidote over stopping the emperor. Ronie couldn't blame her—she would be doing the same thing in that situation.

Deep within his lowered hood, Emperor Cruiga smirked, or so Ronie felt. There was not a single shred of empathy for the second death of Zeppos, the man who served him for so many years.

"Connect All Circuits! Open Gate!" the emperor shouted in a voice like a cracked bell, throwing his hands as high as he could and leaning his tall, thin frame backward.

She had no idea what those words meant. But struck by a kind of intuition, Ronie did her best to crane her neck upward through the numbness.

The tall ceiling of the great hall was painted black. A number of expensive-looking decorative lanterns hung from it, but they were not lit. But what drew Ronie's eye was something in the center of that ceiling—a circular hole directly over where the goblins lay.

It was about thirty cens across. The work was not finely done; it was crude, with broken wood ends visible along the edges. It looked as though the floor of

the upstairs room above had been broken through with an ax.

Why would they do such a thing? she thought. Within seconds, that curiosity turned to horror.

Through the hole pulsed something black and gleaming. Something viscous, something muddy. It was very similar to the claylike material that made up Zeppos's body.

To Ronie and Tiese's shock, the black claylike substance hung down from the hole. It moved like it was being pushed through by some great force or else was oozing out of its own will. The liquid bulged like a balloon, pulsed, writhed—and then burst with an awful sound.

It fell to the ground like a pitch-black waterfall, instantly engulfing the three mountain goblins and forming a cover over them before Ronie's and Tiese's eyes. Once the pile of material was over two mels tall, it stopped pouring down from above at last, but its lifelike pulses did not stop. It began to shiver and shake with the goblins wrapped inside it.

“...!”

Tiese shrieked internally and backed away in a hurry, still holding up Ronie.

The poison had spread all throughout her body; the only thing she could do now was hold tight to the hilt of her sword with unfeeling fingers. If the poison on that knife was fatal, then her body should be rapidly losing life, but the sensations were so numb that she couldn't even feel pain.

She needed the healing art done at once, but Ronie couldn't take her eyes off the writhing black mass. The amorphous pile shivered and separated into three parts. The extended ends of the liquid engulfed the ring of candles, snuffing out the flames one at a time.

Now the only light in the great hall was what little sunlight was coming through the broken window—and the door to the hallway that Ronie kicked open. Both sources were weak and barely reached the center of the room.

They watched with shock as the substance, now a trio of shadows, grew even larger into humanoid forms. Their upper halves bulged with muscle, thick and corded. Their arms were unnaturally long. Legs curved like goats'. Folded wings

on their backs and tails that hung to the floor.

They looked very much like the minions she'd seen at Obsidia Palace. Except for one major difference:

True minions had circular mouths on the end of long, extended heads, like swamp eels, with a pair of eyes on either side. But these monsters' heads were far more human, with pointed noses and ears and just the two eyes, half-closed.

"Those faces...Are they...goblins...?" Tiese murmured. The monsters did indeed look very much like mountain goblins but without any of the rodent-like charm. When they opened their mouths, sharp glittering teeth emerged. Two horns grew from their hairless heads.

Now she remembered what Zeppos had said just minutes before.

You'll be the perfect combat training partner for the goblins, but they can't get through that little passageway, of course...

If the three minions were the transformed result of the three goblins being overtaken by the emperor's sacred art and the black substance, then it was true that they couldn't fit back down the stairs to the basement. They were two and a half mels tall now, and if they stretched their bent legs completely straight, their heads might reach the ceiling.

Most likely, Zeppos and the emperor, after dying in the Rebellion of the Four Empires, were placed within that black substance, too, so they came back to life as minions. The three goblins were alive when they were absorbed, thus transforming into gigantic minions.

There had to be an even greater evil lurking behind these phenomena. Someone used the remains of the emperor to bring him back and taught him how to manufacture these minions. And that person, whoever it was, had to be the key between the string of events in the human realm and whoever performed the kidnapping in Obsidia.

But at this very moment, the top priority was finding a way to return the goblins to their original forms.

If they destroyed these minions in the same way as Zeppos, the goblins inside

would surely die, too. They needed to break down the black clay without hurting the goblins. It might be possible by throwing enough light elements at it, but ten or twenty wouldn't be nearly enough. And there couldn't be that much sacred power still left in this hall.

"Ronie, drink this," said a whispering voice. A little bottle touched her lips. She thought it was an elixir to recover her life, but the smell was different. While Ronie had been pondering what to do, Tiese was busy creating an antidote from reagents and sacred arts.

The liquid trickling into her mouth was powerfully bitter, but one mouthful already had her tongue prickling with sensation once again. How had Tiese determined which type of poison Ronie was afflicted with, though?

Her partner saw the question in her eyes and whispered, "I think that knife is Ruberyl's poisoned steel. It's my first time seeing it in person, but the color is exactly the way Lady Linel described it."

Ronie blinked to say, *So that's what it was.*

The Integrity Knights Linel Synthesis Twenty-Eight and Fazel Synthesis Twenty-Nine once tried to paralyze and kill Kirito and Eugeo with poisoned blades. Now they were trustworthy senior knights and gave all kinds of interesting advice that the other knights did not. At some point, they must have taught Tiese about the poisoned dagger.

As the paralysis wore off of her mouth and jaw, Ronie managed to struggle her way through a whisper. "Tiese...Can't kill...the minions. Have to save...the goblins."

"...I know," said Tiese with determination, looking toward the broken window. "But I don't have the ability to melt three minions' worth with light elements. Once you can move again, we're going to get you out of here."

"...But..."

If they escaped, then the emperor and his minions might disappear. They might not be able to sneak through the underground passage, but the minions could fly. It would be impossible to pursue them without dragons.

"I know. But it's the only thing we can do," Tiese said, her expression pained.

She leaned close to Ronie's ear. "If arts didn't work, and we had to use our swords on them...we still couldn't slice open those minions."

"...!!"

Ronie gasped with what little strength she had left.

It was true. The minions *were* the goblins. Cutting them meant killing them, so even if they determined that they had no choice but to do so, their bodies might not comply with the mind's order. It was the Seal of the Right Eye...

But that didn't just apply to the girls. The other Integrity Knights and the soldiers of the Human Guardian Army were bound by the same rule: "You must not harm the demi-humans, for the sake of the peace of both realms." So any of them would be trapped in the same situation.

What if it weren't just the three of them?

What if tens—hundreds—of demi-humans transformed into minions attacked Centoria all at once? The Integrity Knighthood would be unable to fight them.

In fact, something even worse might happen.

The reason Emperor Cruiga and Zeppos had kidnapped the goblins and turned them into minions was to start a new war between the human realm and the Dark Territory. If these minions attacked Centoria and killed several people, only for them to be later identified as goblins, the effect would be far worse than Yazen's murder. Fury and hatred that completely eclipsed that of the Otherworld War would arise, and the humans would seek to invade the Dark Territory this time.

In order to avoid that permanent break in relations, some of the knights might be able to suppress their right-eye seals and defeat the minions.

But what if the emperor and whoever was behind him didn't want to make the two worlds fight but simply desired to destroy the current peace—to bring an end to the Unification Council's rule?

Wouldn't they try turning human beings into minions instead of nonhumans?

At most, there were two or three hundred visitors from the Dark Territory present in the realm. Even if they kidnapped every last one of them, there was a

limit to the number of minions they could make. But the population of the empires was over eighty thousand. As long as they had enough of that clay material, they had all the human sources they needed.

Against humans from the empires transformed into minions, none of the Integrity Knights could do a thing.

After pacifying the Council with an army of minions, they could lead an army into the Dark Territory and wipe out the Dark Army, too. It would be the return of Administrator's grand plan of sword soldiers.

In the blink of an eye, Ronie had her idea. She stared at the shadow of Emperor Cruiga between the three unmoving minions.

He was resting one knee on the ground, seemingly spent from such a long sacred art. But the invisible aura of evil that seeped from his black robe was not diluted in the least. It was true malice, equal to or even beyond that of the kidnapper who tried to kill little Leazetta in Obsidia Palace.

They couldn't let this man get away.

And in reaction to her resolve, the emperor moved. He got unsteadily to his feet and made his way through the minions, who were waiting on standby, so that he could face off against Ronie and Tiese.

"...I do not know your style, but it was an impressive technique, girl."

Ronie was so taken aback by these words that she had no response in the moment. But the emperor was not waiting for one. From his hood, the croaking voice continued.

"I can see how you were able to kill me and cut off Hozaika's left arm."

It was chilling to hear him say *you were able to kill me* so matter of factly, but she didn't recognize the other name. Or more accurately, it sounded familiar, but she couldn't place where she'd heard it.

But while Ronie struggled to remember, Tiese gasped. The arm holding Ronie up tensed.

"Hozaika Eastavarieth...?"

"None other. I suppose he did not name himself to you, then."

At last, Ronie realized whose name that was.

The emperor of Eastavarieth, who perished in the Rebellion of the Four Empires.

But Cruiga was under some mistaken impression. The battle where they fought one year ago was at the North Centorian palace. They were never in East Centoria. It was Nergius and Entokia who had invaded the East Centorian palace and cut Emperor Hozaiika down to size.

And besides, in all her life, Ronie had only ever cut three human beings with her sword techniques, including the recently departed Zeppos. The first was Emperor Cruiga, and the second was the robed kidnapper on the top floor of Obsidia Palace.

Like just moments ago, Ronie had used Sonic Leap to rush at the kidnapper and cut off his left arm.

Left arm...

Thanks to the antidote, Ronie's skin was regaining sensitivity, and now she felt the hair stand up all over her body, from her toes to the nape of her neck. She could hear the kidnapper's voice, faint in her ears.

Ah, so it was the swordsman delegate who cut the chain. You are more trouble than even the stories say...

Now she realized that if the kidnapper had been from the Dark Territory, he would not have heard about the swordsman delegate. Kirito's two previous visits to Obsidia had both been in secret; the people in town had never even seen him.

"Y-you mean...," she gasped, working her parched throat, trying to decipher the emperor's words. "You mean the kidnapper in Obsidia was the emperor of Eastavarieth, resurrected as a minion just like you...?"

Cruiga's pointed mustache twitched with mirth. "You never found Hozaiika's body, did you?" he said. Before Ronie could respond, he waved his hand. "Have no fear—he is dead. When he hit the ground, his body melted into nothing...just like Zeppos's."

He was admitting that the kidnapper was both Emperor Hozaika and a minion. But that left her with a new question.

“...Why would you know that? You should have been here the whole time,” asked Tiese, not Ronie.

Emperor Cruiga answered her not with words but by opening his robe.

Hanging on a delicate chain over his chest was a shining red jewel, the color of blood even in the darkness. It was exactly the same as what the kidnapper, Emperor Hozaika, wore around his neck, too.

“Hozaika’s plot failed, and he died again. With his vessel broken, he will not come back. But I have received that which he saw and heard, to serve as the foundation for the next plan...Do you see now? These fusion-type minions are part of that...In their original form, we learned, they would not stop you knights.”

He reached out to stroke the muscular arm of a minion with great satisfaction.

Despite the succession of shocks, surprises, and horrors, Ronie tried her hardest to think.

The “vessel” he mentioned was probably the insignia that popped out of Zeppos’s head. She had no idea how it worked, but it was clearly a vital element of the minion-body resurrection method.

Emperor Hozaika had fallen out of the window on the top floor of Obsidia Palace after Sheyta and Ronie had severed his arms. They didn’t find his body, not because he flew away to escape, but because the fall smashed his vessel and caused his clay body to dissolve.

But if she took Cruiga’s statement as truth, the red jewel around Hozaika’s neck survived the fall. And through some means, it had traveled three thousand kilors from Obsidia to Norlangarth, where it gave Cruiga all of Hozaika’s memories and knowledge.

If all of this conjecture was correct, then that red jewel was the core of the massive plot that threatened to engulf both worlds.

As the paralyzing poison was purified, and her hand could move again, Ronie clenched her sword tight.

They couldn't run away now. And even if they defeated Emperor Cruiga, if the jewel vanished somewhere, all that built-up malice would surely reappear somewhere else.

"Tiese...find a way to lure those minions away for thirty seconds," she whispered, so quiet that even she could barely hear it. "If I kill the emperor, it might return the goblins to normal."

It was a faint hope, but if the one controlling them was gone, it might at least buy them a little time.

The problem was that while the poison was wearing off, the wound on the top of her foot wasn't healed. A strong, firm step was a crucial part of swordfighting, and she would have only one or two chances to strike at her strongest. One way or another, she had to do it.

"...Got it," whispered Tiese over her shoulder at the same volume.

She wiggled all her fingers and toes one last time, just to confirm they could feel again. The emperor's lengthy and helpful answers gave her enough time for the antidote to spread, but it also helped him, too. The emperor had recovered from his mental exhaustion—however you defined the "mind" that existed in the head of a minion made of packed clay and mud—and now the skin of the fusion-type minions was gleaming with a texture that looked much harder than when it was freshly finished.

Cruiga tapped the minion's arm again and nodded with satisfaction.

"Now, my plan called for Zeppos to be their combat training partner, but he has already perished. You will have to assume that responsibility," he said, backing away.

The original type of minion that Emperor Hozaiika had used in Obsidia obeyed only a limited number of very simple commands in the sacred or dark tongues. Their intellect was at the level of a wild beast, and they could not match the complexity of an Integrity Knight's combination of sword techniques and sacred arts. In the Otherworld War, the dark mages guild's stockpile of eight hundred

minions were unable to recognize Bercouli's Perfect Weapon Control trap, which had obliterated them in a single instant.

Whatever improvements this fusion-type minion acquired by absorbing the goblins were probably found in this category, then. They would surely be capable of understanding more advanced, complex orders. But it would take him time to give many orders, of course. That would be her chance to strike down the enemy.

Behind the line of minions, Emperor Cruiga raised his arm, as if giving orders to imperial soldiers.

"Minions! Kill those two girls! *Activate!!*"

That was all he said. A short order in the common tongue and then a sacred word to close it out.

There was a vibrating sound, and the minions' eyes flashed red. The two on the right and left suddenly sprang into action, so fast that their huge forms were nothing but a blur. The left minion jumped toward the broken window, and the other took a position before the open doors.

Ronie and Tiese were trapped inside the great hall. In order to fulfill their orders to kill, the minions recognized that they could not let their targets escape and blocked the two places that served as escape routes.

That made it clear to Ronie that her expectations were wrong: The fused minions' intelligence was far beyond just accepting complex orders—they could assess a situation and act on their own judgment.

With the escape routes blocked, only one monster was still between her and Emperor Cruiga. She couldn't cut through the minion because of the innocent goblin stuck inside, but she *could* avoid its attacks and aim for the emperor.

Tiese! she thought, sending a mental signal to her partner. The arm supporting her back pushed Ronie forward. With her wounded foot, she pounced off the ground. Fresh blood spurted from her boot and knee, and the dulled pain came roaring back like a hot poker, but she gritted her teeth and endured.

The two knights together charged with electric speed, but the minion's

reaction was unbelievably agile. Its long right arm, like a thirty-cen-thick log, came roaring toward them in a vicious swipe. There were scythe-like fingers at the end of it that would surely cut their bodies into pieces if they struck.

But Ronie anticipated this attack.

No matter how advanced these fusion minions were, their overall shape was not that different from the original minions. That meant that, like the originals, their main weapon was their claws.

“Krrhh!” she grunted through gritted teeth, luring those wicked-sharp hooks to lunge at her as far as possible and pulling herself backward at the waist just short of where they would connect.

She slid along the floor on her legs, avoiding the swing. The pinkie claw clipped her hair as it waved loosely, chopping three cens off the end, but that was a small price to pay.

Having missed with its full-force swipe, the minion’s momentum rotated it left, exposing its back to Ronie. Since a minion’s form was humanoid, it couldn’t attack from that position. She rose again, grabbing the friction of the carpet with her left foot; Cruiga was just seven mels in front of her.

It was within the range of Sonic Leap. One good attack could split through his head to break the vessel inside it, as well as the red jewel that hung over his chest, and all of this would be over.

She pushed hard off her bloodied right foot once again, raised her Moonbeam Sword for the attack—and then something black and long and thin leaped up abruptly from the darkened floor like a whip. It went directly at Ronie’s throat with unbelievable speed.

On pure reaction, she lifted her left arm to protect her neck.

In a hundredth of a second, the black whip struck her forearm.

It’s the minion’s tail.

With the momentum of its full turn, the fusion minion used the one weapon it had on the rear side—its tail—to swing around with even greater speed than its arm.

Ronie's realization came at the same instant that her left forearm snapped. And the tail, which might as well have been woven around a metal rod, continued its momentum into her chest, knocking her into the air and pushing her backward with tremendous force.

She flew over ten meters through the air, slammed into the wall with her back, and fell to the floor on the rebound.

Her vision went black. She couldn't breathe. Several ribs were broken in addition to her arm, but the shock to her entire body was so massive that she couldn't even feel the pain.

She had to stand, but her body wouldn't listen. Despite her metal armor, which was admittedly on the light side, the single blow had knocked her life down into dangerously low territory.

"Ronieeee!!"

Somewhere, Tiese was screaming her name. With all her strength, she shifted her face up off the floor, trying to see through fading eyes.

On the left, she could vaguely make out her partner running to her. And on the right, a gigantic shadow zooming forward with great speed.

...Tiese...run.

But there was no strength in her throat. Only air emerged.

Tiese noticed the minion rushing after her and came to a stop to fight back. But the moment she pulled back her standard-issue sword, she paused unnaturally.

It was the right-eye seal coming into effect. Ronie's injury had caused her to forget herself momentarily, and when she had tried to attack the minion, she remembered there was a goblin trapped inside it.

Up until this point in her life, Ronie had never activated the seal. But she heard that the pain it caused was like one's soul being cracked apart. As far as she knew, the only ones to have ever surpassed the seal of their own will were Eugeo; Alice; Lilpilin, chief of the orcs; and Commander Iskahn, who tore out his own eye to remove it.

While Tiese was immobilized by that terrible agony, the minion struck her with full force. Four trails of blood spurted into the air, and Ronie forgot her own pain for a moment as she let out a silent scream.

Tiese's body crashed against the floor and bounced once before rolling over close to Ronie. Her eyes were closed; she seemed to be unconscious. Blood streamed from the wounds where the minion's claws had gouged her flesh.

"Tie...se..."

There was blood dripping from Ronie's mouth, too, as she crawled desperately toward her partner, reaching with her broken arm to place a palm on her friend's skin. If she didn't cast a light-element healing art now, Tiese was going to die.

"Syst...Ca...ll...", she said, but there wasn't enough volume behind her voice, and the command did not activate. Her hand was red up to the wrist where she pressed against Tiese's wound.

Integrity Knights had weapon-equipping and magic-authority levels that were far higher than the soldiers of the regular army, as well as the overwhelming strength and stamina that those authority levels conferred, but their life value was still not much different from that of an ordinary person. The hardest elite knights had a level of about five thousand, and seventeen-year-olds Ronie and Tiese were only at three thousand.

She didn't need to be able to speak to open the Stacia Window; that only required the sacred gesture. But Ronie did not have the fortitude to see Tiese's number now. Through teary eyes, she maintained pressure on the wound and tried repeatedly to invoke the art command.

There was a ringing sound on the far end of the room; that was the minion that had knocked them both into a near-death state picking up Tiese's sword from the ground and hurling it away.

The other two remained at their guard posts without moving. They must have determined that one of them would be more than enough to kill the two girls. With assured, careful steps, the free minion strode closer, ready to finish the job.

“Heh-heh-heh...heh-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!” Emperor Cruiga laughed from the center of the room. “Splendid. Just one of them is *this* powerful—and from fusing with a lowly goblin. It turns out that the more blood and bone you spill into the ground, the stronger a minion it creates. This is beyond what I could have imagined. I must offer praise to my serfs—they dedicate themselves to my betterment even after death...Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

At this point, Ronie could not even process the meaning of what she was hearing. Her eyesight was growing darker by the moment. The emperor’s laughter was fading. The only sensation she could still feel was Tiese’s blood on her left hand. Even that warmth was going away, moment by moment.

The minion was before them now. It lifted both its arms high.

And just then—she felt a faint warmth in her *right* hand.

At first, she didn’t know what she was holding. It was hard, fine leather, wrapped around...the handle of the Moonbeam Sword.

Ba-bump, ba-bump. Its warmth pulsed, speaking to her. *Unleash me*, it was saying.

But she couldn’t do *that*. The Moonbeam Sword was a very fine, high-priority weapon, but it was not a Divine Object.

A Divine Object was not forged from refined metal by people. It was fashioned from legendary sources, like Divine Beasts, birds, and trees. It was why each one of them had its own unique memories and could forge a personal connection with its master.

But a human blacksmith forged the Moonbeam Sword, so it had no memory from a previous life. She might use it so much that it became an extension of her own hand and arm, but it could never produce a phenomena beyond that.

It can’t. It can’t...

The words repeated in her mind, over and over, as time itself flattened, growing thinner and longer in the face of Ronie’s and Tiese’s deaths.

But then she thought she heard a new voice.

It’s not just swords. Clothes, shoes, silverware...even a single element

summoned by sacred arts will answer your call, if your heart and mind are connected to it. Even people, I'd bet...

It was something she'd heard before, in the long distant past, from the late Eugeo.

Connecting hearts.

It was Ronie, the master, who decided that the Moonbeam Sword couldn't have a heart. But upon reflection, when Swordswoman Subdelegate Asuna presented her with three swords and told her to pick one, Ronie did not choose for herself but had allowed the swords to pick. It was this sword, with the silver hilt fashioned into a crescent moon, that drew itself into the palm of her hand.

And now that its master's life was in danger, the sword she'd named Moonbeam was speaking to her, trying to save her. Telling her to trust it, connect to it, and unleash its memory.

The warmth in her right hand from the handle and the warmth in her left hand from Tiese's blood traveled to the center of her body, and Ronie used all that meager strength to shout "Enhance Armament!"

Or at least, she wanted to shout it. What emerged was so weak and quiet that even she couldn't hear it.

But the sword—and the laws of the world itself—responded to her call.

From the hilt of the sword surged an impossibly bright silver light. The minion stopped in the process of lowering its claws and let out a high-pitched scream as the light flooded forward, jumping away. The other two minions and even the cackling Emperor all covered their eyes and writhed.

At the same time, Ronie could feel the pain easing in her broken arm and wounded foot. The blood coursing from Tiese's wounds was rapidly stopping, too.

Perfect Weapon Control.

The true, core technique of Incarnation, the power that only senior knights with divine weapons could wield.

Most likely, the Moonbeam Sword was expending its own life in the form of

ghostly light, a kind of augmented version of light-element healing arts. It was a very simple kind of Perfect Weapon Control, as far as such things went, but for Ronie, who'd been an apprentice knight for less than a year, activating it without significant training was a virtual miracle.

The weapon shone for over ten seconds before the light slowly began to fade, then blinked, and eventually extinguished. The deep cuts on Tiese's torso stopped bleeding, and her face was regaining a touch of red. But she wasn't waking up again, and Ronie's arm and leg weren't completely healed, either.

The three minions, meanwhile, were smoking where the light had touched their bodies, but they hadn't completely dissolved. The damage was only on the surface level, and they would probably recover any moment now.

She wanted to stop the emperor from getting away, but not at the cost of Tiese's life. They had to get out of the hall—no, out of the mansion—before the minions started to attack again.

Summoning all the willpower the sword gave her, Ronie stood up, cradling Tiese with her left hand. The double doorway to the hall was a larger exit, but she couldn't escape if the minions followed her. The only option was getting into the front yard through the broken window.

"Hang in there just a bit longer, Tiese!" she whispered to her comatose friend, beginning to run toward the window, fifteen mels away.

With each step, pain exploded in her arm and foot like sparks. It soon grew hard to breathe, and the air wheezed through her lungs.

Ten mels to go. Eight. Seven...

"Minions, block the window!" shouted Emperor Cruiga, recovered from the damage of the ghostly light.

"Shrohbbb!!"

The minion curled up near the broken window howled, its voice both reminiscent of, and completely alien to, the sound of the mountain goblins. It stood before the escape route, extending its arms and wings. The escape route was now entirely blocked, as was the sunset light.

Behind them, the other two minions howled as well. In order to escape, the one before the window would have to be eliminated. But Ronie couldn't attack the fusions. Even if she wanted to slash at a leg to immobilize it, the right-eye seal would activate and freeze her, the way it did to Tiese.

The only method left was to use Perfect Weapon Control again. That healing light would burn the minion's body but leave the goblin within unharmed. But how much of the Moonbeam Sword's life was left? There was no time to check its Stacia Window.

If she attempted Perfect Weapon Control again and expended all of its life, the Moonbeam Sword would shatter.

Even still...her sword would forgive her for trying to save Tiese.

Ronie tried to lift her arm as she ran, desperate.

And then she heard something.

Something like countless brass instruments in harmony. Like the stars that blanketed the sky, sparkling with music.

Like hundreds upon hundreds of angels singing.

Laaaaaaaaaaaaa!

Rainbow light burst through the ceiling of the great hall, accompanied by the thunderous chorus.

Light so pure it did not seem to come from this earth shone down—but the minions were not pained. Their red eyes blinked in confusion as they stared at the ceiling.

Then a thin lattice of lights ran through that ceiling. It grew thicker and thicker. The ceiling itself was being broken down into dozens of boards, each one completely separated from the others, yet they did not fall. They floated in the air, then slid away in all directions.

But the ceiling was not the only thing being dismantled. The walls of the upstairs, the roof, even the furniture was enveloped in the scintillating light, silently moving away from their original locations. It was as though the house were built of carefully assembled wooden blocks that were crumbling outward

instead of inward.

The waves of destruction reached the walls of the first floor. The sturdy-looking edifices crumbled into pieces of gray stone that slid outward into the yard. The glass windows followed them, the panes separated entirely from their frames.

In less than twenty seconds, the enormous building was completely disassembled, leaving just the floor. The sound of the angels faded, as did the rainbow light.

And then, with a monumental crash, the plethora of floating materials crashed to the ground.

When the most orderly destruction in the world was complete, Ronie was no longer standing inside the mansion. The dark carpet was still beneath her feet, but the only thing overhead was the deep-red evening sky. The burning disc of Solus was partially blocked on the lower end by the End Mountains, and the north wind still brisk with winter brushed their hair.

The three minions and Emperor Cruiga were frozen in place with shock. If they were original minions with no minds of their own, they would ignore the change in situation and keep attacking, but the smarter fusion-type minions were paradoxically paralyzed with confusion.

Yet Ronie was equally at a loss. She'd gone from a desperate, doomed attempt to escape the great hall, and now it—and the entire imperial villa, so saturated with evil and terror—had been completely demolished in a matter of seconds. She couldn't wrap her mind around it.

"...Ronie," said a faint voice in her left ear. That was enough to spur her mind back into activity. Just as hoarse, she called back, "Tiese!"

But her friend, who was conscious again, wasn't looking at Ronie. Her maple-red eyes were fixed on one point in the southern sky. Ronie's head turned to look in the same direction.

At the boundary where the sky turned from golden yellow to red floated a little shadow. It was one—no, two people. One was a woman in a pearlescent dress, with long brown hair that fluttered in the wind. In her right hand, she had

drawn a rapier.

And the other, supporting her with a hand around her waist, was a black-haired young man wearing a plain black shirt and pants. The hem of his jacket had transformed into dragon-like wings that were beating slowly.

When Ronie looked harder, she noticed what was clutched in the woman's left arm: an animal with pale-yellow downy feathers. An animal with a long neck and tail and little wings of its own. A baby dragon.

"Tsukigake..."

Her voice was trembling, and when she inhaled, her throat trembled with hot emotion. She also called the names of the two people.

"Lady Asuna...Kirito..."

Little Tsukigake had run her hardest all the way to Centoria and called for the two of them. The scintillating light that broke down the mansion was none other than the Unlimited Landscape Manipulation ability belonging to Asuna, the only person in all the Underworld with the power of Stacia at her fingertips.

After Ronie and Tiese, Emperor Cruiga noticed the presence of the people staring down at him from a great height. His dangling fingers curled like claws, creaking and cracking so loudly that even Ronie could hear it.

"...Swordsman delegate...of the Human Unification Council. What *won't* you do to confound me?"

His voice was so twisted and cracked that its very utterance felt like a curse. The emperor's robe swooped, his sleeve swaying as an arm as thin as a dead branch jutted toward the people in the sky.

"Minions! Strike down those insolent cretins!"

The three fusions quickly looked to the sky at the sound of their new order, and their pointed jaws opened wide. Beyond the rows of sharp teeth, purple miasma writhed and congealed.

Was it possible that the fusions had the ability to unleash breath attacks like the heat beams of the dragons?

"They're aiming at you!" Ronie shouted, but her voice was still frail and tiny.

They couldn't have heard it from a hundred miles up in the air.

But Kirito reacted immediately after Ronie's shout, lifting his idle right hand up toward the sky. In its grasp was a black longsword that gleamed gold in the light of the setting sun. That was Kirito's Night-Sky Blade.



The trio of minions opened their jaws as far as they could, preparing to unleash their darkness breath. The vicinity suddenly grew much darker.

At first, Ronie thought that the miasma coming from the minions' mouths was blocking the sunlight. But she immediately realized this was not the case. It wasn't just around the minions that was getting dark—the whole forest surrounding the mansion was plunged into deep shadow. The vivid, crimson sunset had abruptly turned into the dark purple of night, complete with twinkling stars.

Even Solus on the western horizon lost all its light, as though Lunaria had completely covered its passage.

But in the midst of this sudden arrival of night, there was one thing that shone fiercer than before.

It was the Night-Sky Blade in Kirito's hand. The flat of the blade was emitting a golden light so bright that you almost couldn't look directly at it.

Even Cruiga was taken aback by the arrival of another supernatural phenomenon, this one far surpassing the dismantling of the mansion. But he recovered, throwing his left arm into the air and boldly shouting, "Pay it no mind! Shoot them!!"

The minions threw back their heads into the sky and unleashed the purple miasma, which shone with a very dull glow of its own. Unlike the searing rods of heat from the dragons, these were spheres that left a trail behind them. They rose into the sky with an eerie sound like the screaming of a wild beast. Kirito swung down the Night-Sky Blade at them.

Ronie's vision was filled with white.

It was so bright that she couldn't keep her eyes all the way open, but she forced her face to stay in place so she could see it for herself.

The light was coming from a vast number of particles in the air. The dots of pure-white light held no heat, but they filled the air all around. The miasma breath continued ascending, devouring the motes of light along the way, but like a chunk of ice dropped into hot water, they shrank rapidly and ultimately blinked out of existence.

“...Are these...all...light elements...?” Tiese whispered. Ronie nodded silently.

The appearance, color, and movement of the points of light were exactly those of familiar light elements. But generating any element, not just light elements, was limited by the number of fingers of the caster: ten at once.

And there were thousands...even tens of thousands of light elements filling the air at this moment.

She could guess at how they were generated. Kirito’s Night-Sky Blade had a Perfect Weapon Control art—technically, it was the higher version of that, Memory Release—that absorbed the sacred power directly out of the space around it. He used that power to suck up the light of Solus and turn that vast sacred power into light elements.

But elements released from their caster’s mental control either vanished or burst. When you learned, you started with maintaining a single element on one finger. Once you could control five on one hand, you were a proper artifician, and a master of the craft could control all ten fingers at once. Ronie and Tiese could only manage five at once right now.

How could he possibly control ten thousand of those capricious elements at once? Ronie simply gazed up at the floating lights in wonder; they looked like glowing snowflakes all around her.

The minions, meanwhile, opened their mouths again for another round of miasma breath.

That was when the floating lights all began to move. As though they possessed one mind among them, the ten thousand dots flowed and swirled, enveloping the three minions. Like when they were exposed to the ghostly light of the Moonbeam Sword, their skin smoked and hissed, exuding foul-smelling smoke. But that did not last long:

The dark-gray bodies were permeated by the light elements until the glowing was coming from within them—and without so much as a scream, the horrible monsters simply crumbled into liquid form.

As the substance splattered and flew, it evaporated into thin air, promptly exposing the mountain goblins that tumbled out onto the ground. They were

unconscious and missing their clothes and accoutrements, but they were unharmed.

Some of the light elements swirled around Ronie and Tiese as well, healing their wounds. A warmth and comfort that was difficult to put into words threatened to ease her entire body, but she focused hard and stayed on her feet.

As soon as the fusions were gone, and the girls' wounds were healed, the sky regained its sunset color.

The majority of the light elements had expired, having completed their role, but the last few hundred or so arranged themselves into ten rings that floated not far off the ground. They were placed in a parallel pattern rising vertically, forming a tall cage holding none other than Emperor Cruiga Norlangarth. The rings were just wide enough not to touch the edges of his robe. If he moved even a little, the light elements would infuse his clay body and cause him to dissolve, too.

In the light of the setting sun, a bit redder and darker than before, the man was now an utter shadow, his face hidden beneath his hood. Of course, the haughty, proud emperor would never become a meek prisoner by choice.

"Can you stand, Tiese?" Ronie murmured.

Her partner nodded crisply. "Yes, I'm fine now. Thanks, Ronie."

"I should say the same...Thank you, Tiese."

They hugged for a moment. After a quick examination of her injuries, Ronie saw that there was only a slight scar left on her right foot and above the knee, and her left arm and ribs were intact once more, if not perfectly so. Tiese had been hurt even worse, but she was able to move again without trouble.

Tiese's sword was resting on the opposite end of the great hall floor, where the minion had thrown it. She started to walk over to retrieve it, but Ronie held out a hand to stop her.

"You can get it later. Don't take your eyes off the emperor."

Tiese nodded, her expression tense. They were worried about the mountain

goblins, too, but he might attempt to cast some art upon them again. Ronie approached the rings of light carefully, sword held at the ready.

Kirito and Asuna were descending in a graceful arc from the sky above. Ronie and Tiese's job was to make sure the emperor couldn't attempt any nonsense before they landed.

When the girls came to a stop three meters away from the cage, the robed figure in black shivered.

"Heh-heh, heh-heh-heh-heh..."

It was a horrible chuckling that snuck into the ear. She pointed her sword at him, but the emperor did not stop laughing.

"Cruiga Norlangarth...your plot is at an end. Surrender peacefully this time," she said as menacingly as possible. He stopped laughing, but it did nothing to change his arrogant demeanor.

"This is a repeat of one year ago, girl. I chose a death of glory then. Did you think I would submit to indignity this time?"

"You don't have any other choice."

"Choice...? You don't understand. None of you understand a thing," the emperor muttered. His hood tilted up just a bit. Ronie glanced up, too; Kirito and Asuna were just over the mansion now. Merely ten seconds, perhaps, until they touched down.

I won't let him do anything, she told herself.

She did not expect the method that the emperor used to slip past her watch.

"This is farewell for now, girl. May we meet again," he said, leaning forward.

"Ah—!"

Tiese gasped and reached out, but there was nothing she could do. The rings of light, which were no more than a milice thick, sliced straight through the robe and Cruiga's body as he tilted through them. The clay form was chopped into layers that tumbled loudly to the ground in a pile, starting from the top.

Eleven black pieces promptly melted into a liquid substance that spread out

and began to evaporate. By the time Kirito and Asuna landed behind them, the only things on the carpet were some scraps of black cloth and two accessories.

One was a golden ring carved with the family crest. The other was an eerie, glowing red jewel set into a blackened chain.

Ronie was standing still in shock when Kirito rushed up and put a hand on her shoulder. “I’m sorry I’m so late! Are you all right?!”

Instantly, her nerves loosened, and she nearly fell to the ground, but she retained enough strength to stay standing and turned to the delegate.

“Y-yes, I’m fine,” she said. “But the emperor...”

“E-emperor?!” Kirito repeated, looking utterly shocked. But she couldn’t give him a detailed explanation. As Asuna was reaching out to comfort Tiese, a little yellow mass leaped free and smothered itself over Ronie’s face.

“Kyurrrrrrrr!”

That sound, at last, brought tears to Ronie’s eyes. “Tsukigake!”

She gave her sword to Kirito so she could hug her dragon with both arms.

Up close, it was clear that Tsukigake’s feathers were smeared with mud and blood in places, and her beautiful tail feathers were in a dreadful state. Centoria was a long distance away, but just running through fields and meadows wouldn’t cause damage like that. Tsukigake must have gone through a terrible ordeal to bring Kirito and Asuna here.

She caressed the crooning baby dragon, and soon there came another high-pitched cry from the eastern woods.

A ball of light-blue fluff burst out of the brush and came rolling into the open. It made its way through the stacked-up remnants of the mansion out in the yard and bounded onto the carpeted floor in the middle, then leaped high into the air toward Tiese.

“Shimosaki!!” she cried, embracing her dragon. Asuna stood nearby, watching with a beaming smile.

“If we hadn’t heard Shimosaki crying and seen the light elements flashing through the windows, we wouldn’t have noticed this place. You fought so well,”

she said.

“.....Thank you...,” Tiese said, her voice tearful. Shimosaki crowed “*Krrrrr!*” into her chest, Tsukigake added in a “*Kyurrr!*” of her own, and then there was a third cry that went “*Kyu-kyuu!*”

“...?!”

To Tiese’s shock, the extra voice was coming from a creature in Kirito’s jacket that was much smaller than the juvenile dragons. It raced up his body and perched atop his head. The brown animal looked like a cross between a rat and a rabbit, with very long ears. It looked around at the entire group and squeaked “*Kyuu!*” with great insistence.

“K...Kirito, what is that?” she asked.

He rolled his eyes upward toward the rat on his head and said, “Well, uh...we were flying over the fields on the southern edge of the private holding when we saw Tsukigake fighting against some type of badgers...”

“I don’t think they were badgers, more like coatis,” Asuna pointed out.

“What’s a...?” he murmured. “Never mind. Anyway, we drove off the...coatis and healed Tsukigake’s wounds. Then, when we were about to start flying toward the lake, Tsukigake ran over to a wooden bucket...and this guy popped out.”

“From the bucket...?”

“Yeah. Based on the circumstances, it seems like Tsukigake helped it hide inside the bucket before fighting the coatis. I thought it might be some kind of quest flag...er, something important to keep around, so I brought it along, but nothing really happened,” the swordsman delegate explained.

Tsukigake looked back and forth between Ronie and Kirito, then crooned, “*Krrrr...*”

The rat chimed in with a “*Kyu-kyu-kyu!*”

Ronie didn’t know exactly what Tsukigake’s chirping meant—and certainly not the rat’s. But she could get a vague sense of the implications and tried to put them into human words.

“Ummm...it seems to me like Tsukigake made some kind of a deal with that rat...”

“A deal...?” said Kirito and Asuna and Tiese together. The rat bounced up and down unhappily on the delegate’s head. It was such a funny sight that Ronie burst into giggles.

But at just that moment, on the floor not far from them, there was a blood-red flash.

“*Kii!*” the rat shrieked, and it dived into Kirito’s pocket. Tsukigake and Shimosaki both growled a warning.

Ronie held up a hand to block the eye-piercing light and caught sight of its source.

It was the jewel resting on the ground. The necklace that both Emperor Cruiga and Emperor Hozaika had worn around their necks.

“Kirito! That’s the root of all this evil!” Ronie shouted. Kirito took a step toward the red light.

Then the jewel shot up into the sky with terrifying speed. The red light raced upward faster than even the art that shot fire arrows. Kirito reached out with his hand. The light slowed at once and came to a stop in the air about thirty meters up.

He had grabbed it with Incarnate Arms.

His Incarnation could make an entire metal dragoncraft fly; of course, the jewel couldn’t shake it off, Ronie was certain. But the jewel did not descend. It hung in that spot in the air, the chain trembling and taut beneath it.

The stalemate lasted all of three seconds.

With a loud, abrupt *crack!* the chain Kirito was pulling with Incarnation broke into pieces and fell.

But the jewel, as though freed from shackles, burst upward and simply melted into the red of the sunset. There was one last glimpse of it, nearly up to the clouds, where it briefly left behind a little red trail. The direction of the light’s movement was where Solus was sinking...toward the empire of Wesdarath.

“Tiese, Ronie, how are your injuries doing?” asked the swordswoman subdelegate. The two of them responded energetically.

“I’m perfectly healthy again,” said Ronie.

“Like Kirito would say, I’m at max health!” Tiese added, clenching her fist. She didn’t actually know what the term meant, but Asuna apparently did, and she chuckled.

“That’s good to hear...We put you two through a terrible ordeal...” Her smile faded as she spoke, and her long lashes drooped as she looked away from them.

But Ronie and Tiese protested.

“No, we were the ones who put ourselves in danger...”

“And thanks to your good word, Ayuha made sure that we were fully healed. Just look at this!”

Tiese lifted up her shirt and flipped down her skirt waist to expose her stomach. The place where the minion had slashed her was completely healed, without a single trace left.

That was very good, of course. But just because it was only the three girls on the Morning Star Lookout on the ninety-fifth floor of Central Cathedral didn’t mean that they should be showing off their midriffs.

Ronie reached out and pulled Tiese’s shirt back down. “I must say, Lady Ayuha’s knowledge of medicines is really impressive...I thought we were very diligent students at the academy, but she was pulling out all kinds of plants and minerals I’ve never even heard of.”

“Even after she was given the position of leader of the sacred artificers

brigade, Ayuha has spent her days off going to search for new kinds of herbs on her own. Her sister, Soness, was complaining that she's often forced to taste test them," reported Asuna with a little smile. She added quietly, "Apparently, Ayuha wanted to be an herbalist as a child, and when Kirito told her about how he grew zephilia flowers in North Centoria, it rekindled her love for botany."

"Oh...but I don't know that I would recommend trying to compete with the things Kirito does..." Ronie added without thinking, prompting a big laugh from Tiese. Tsukigake and Shimosaki stopped in the course of eating their dried fish nearby to chirp, while their new friend, Natsu the long-eared wetrat, chewed blissfully on a walnut.

Three days had already passed since the incident on the imperial holding, making today February 27th. The last day of the month, the 30th, would see a great celebration throughout the entirety of Centoria in memorializing the one-year anniversary of the quelling of the Rebellion of the Four Empires. As such, even the cathedral itself was bustling a little more than usual.

But for the Unification Council, the situation was too serious to allow anyone to get carried away.

They had killed both Emperor Hozaike Eastavarieth and Emperor Cruiga Norlangarth one year ago, yet the two men returned with minion bodies and were closely involved in the recent incidents. Cruiga, in particular, had spent a long time hiding out in the emperor's private lands, directly in sight of Centoria, working on a plan to mass-produce fusion-type minions that were much more powerful than the traditional kind. When Fanatio, Deusolbert, and Xiao Choucas of the intelligence agency had heard this, they were shocked.

With that news, they searched the imperial holdings and noble lands of all four empires again, but the most they found was some hidden fortunes—and nothing that tied into any grand conspiracies. The most important search was for the red jewel that had flown into the west from the emperor's villa, but they had found no sign of it since. It was a jewel the size of a songbird's egg, not a human being, so even Fizel and Linel were having trouble conducting the search in the western empire.

As for Emperor Cruiga's other relic, the imperial ring, the two greatest

artificers in the cathedral, Ayuha and Soness, were busy studying it. The emperor had called it a vessel, and while it clearly contained some secret to resurrection, actually extracting and identifying the sacred arts commands from the object was a hundred times harder than placing the art upon it in the first place, according to Soness.

In other words, the strings that would have connected them to the real mastermind were all cut. The only other physical clues they held now were the two knives that Chamberlain Zeppos had possessed and the sacks of clay piled up within the mansion premises. Neither of them seemed likely to develop into new leads.

The Human Unification Council made the decision to hire high-ranking dark mages from the Dark Territory to examine the clay and ring, and the horseback messengers were sending the request along to Obsidia Palace already. But the letter to Commander Iskahn would take another twelve days to arrive—and two weeks for a return message—so the actual hiring wouldn't take place for quite a while.

As for Ronie and Tiese, they were firmly questioned by Fanatio as to why they didn't return to report in as soon as they heard the sound beyond the mansion door. But she also lauded them for finding and rescuing the kidnapped mountain goblins and announced that they would be promoted from apprentice knights to lower Integrity Knights.

The official promotion was scheduled to happen in early March, after the celebration of liberation, but they'd already received their internal numbering.

After Eldrie Synthesis Thirty-One, who perished in the Otherworld War, the thirty-second knight would be Tiese. Ronie would be the thirty-third.

By the knighthood's tradition, they should have to abandon their family names, but *synthesis* was a sacred word indicating one who had received the ritual of synthesizing, so after discussing the matter with Kirito and Asuna, it was decided that because the two hadn't been synthesized, they would simply add the number to their birth names. Next month would see the birth of Tiese Schtrinen Thirty-Two and Ronie Arabel Thirty-Three.

After their promotional battle, their equipment-authority level rose to 40,

which was an absolutely respectable number for a proper knight, but for the moment, Ronie still didn't feel like she was official.

Perhaps that was because, since receiving the news two days ago, she and Tiese had not talked about it once.

Ronie had hinted at the topic a few times, but in each case, Tiese said "Sorry, not yet" and looked away. And in this case, Ronie had a vague idea of why she might not want to.

Most likely, there were two things that Tiese wanted to settle before she rose to the rank of a full-fledged knight.

One was her proposal from Renly.

The other was her love for the late Eugeo.

The entire reason they'd approached the off-limits imperial villa in the first place was to investigate the rumors of ghosts. If the residents had confused anything for a ghost, it was probably the sight of Zeppos digging up soil in the forest.

But in Tiese's case, she was probably hoping that the ghosts were real. If the dead could show themselves, she might actually have a chance to see Eugeo one more time.

There were no ghosts at the emperor's mansion. Yet the battle that ensued probably did nothing but deepen Tiese's ambivalence. Cruiga and Zeppos were dead, brought back to life with vessels and the minion-creation process. In other words, the same method might be capable of bringing Eugeo back.

Eugeo, of course, would not want to be brought back to life in a minion body. But to a painful extent, Ronie understood Tiese's desire to see him one more time, to speak with him and tell him how she truly felt.

Now Tiese was faced with a very accelerated promotion to the knighthood, without having gotten over Eugeo or given Renly an answer to his question. In the daytime, she'd been putting on an even more cheerful demeanor than usual, but Ronie knew that she was in her room crying at night.

She wanted to help. She wanted to lessen her friend's pain. But there was

nothing Ronie could do for her.

Today's tea party was Asuna's idea, after she noticed the way that Tiese's face occasionally betrayed darker moods. Solus's light fell gentle and warm into the Morning Star Lookout, where all the walls were open to the sky, and the balmy breeze told of the approach of spring. The apple-scented tea from Hana's private stock and Asuna's homemade apple pie were both delicious, and in the pleasant afterglow of the meal, watching the three animals frolic, it was hard not to smile.

But even with her peaceful smile, the sadness deep in Tiese's maple-red eyes did not fade away.

At this rate, it was possible that Tiese might refuse the promotion to become a proper knight. In fact, she might even return her sword and insignia to the knighthood and leave Central Cathedral altogether...

Seized by this awful premonition, Ronie's breath caught in her throat for a moment.

Then a voice said "Sorry I'm late!" and Kirito bounded up the stairs onto the lookout.

Asuna stood up and put her hands on her hips. "You're really late! We've already finished off the pie."

"Huh...? D-did you save a slice for me...?"

"Hmm, I don't know, it was really tasty, so..."

"Aw, that's not fair!" he protested, placing a long, wrapped object into a nearby flower planter and taking the seat between Ronie and Asuna.

Asuna had saved some of the pie, of course, and she set out the large slice with some apple tea for him. As he opened wide to take a huge bite, Tiese asked him, "Kirito, you said you were going to be late ahead of time. Where were you?"

"*Mmf, mmf...* Actually, Deu asked me to go somewhere with him...He said he wants to beef up the security measures for the festival on the thirtieth, so we were having a meeting about that."

Ronie pretended not to hear his extremely informal nickname for Instructor Deusolbert. “Um, is that because the Black Emperor Gang might try to do something during the celebration?” she asked.

“B-Black Emperor?” repeated Kirito and Asuna.

Ronie glanced at Tiese and said, “There’s no official title for the people who are responsible for this string of incidents, so we’ve been calling them that...”

“I see. The Black Emperor Gang, huh...? I like that—I’ll use it, too...Anyway, Deu’s worried about exactly that, but I think the likelihood is low. The goal of the revived emperors is stirring up another war between the human realm and the dark realm, and the fusion minions they were going to do it with are dissolved. If they do mess with us again, it’s going to take a while for them to prepare...”

“That’s right,” said Asuna. “Or in other words, if you two hadn’t found Emperor Cruiga’s hideout, perhaps those fusion-type minions would have attacked the liberation festival.”

Kirito nodded. “Exactly...Fanatio might have scolded you for being reckless without backup, but you ended up saving us from a terrible situation. We found over two hundred sacks of clay in the woods...It makes me shiver to consider what would have happened if all those had been turned into minions.”

“In that case, what do you suppose their plan would have been as far as the subjects trapped inside the minions...?” Tiese asked.

Kirito took a sip of apple tea and grimaced. “Hmm...It’s not very practical for them to kidnap every last nonhuman staying in the human realm. For one thing, trade has temporarily halted, and all the tourists are going back home...Oh, by the way, Oroi and the other three mountain goblins are leaving tomorrow morning. They wanted a chance to thank you for what you did.”

“Then we’ll have to go and see them off!” Ronie said at once, looking to the eastern sky.

The Eastern Gate, which had separated the human and dark realms for over four hundred years, collapsed one year and three months ago, to enable war between the two sides. After the war’s finish, the gate was rebuilt, but the new

wooden structure remained open.

After the murder of Yazen, however, the gate was closed again. In that sense, the black emperors had already achieved part of their goal. And the matter hadn't been resolved in the least.

She recalled what Fazel told her in the Great Bath and looked at the side profile of the swordsman delegate's face.

"Um, Kirito. It's true that Aldares Wesdarath V, the emperor of the western empire, was the only one whose body didn't turn up, right...?"

"That's what I hear. Fanatio's Memory Release arts completely burned down West Centoria's Imperial Palace...It took them three months to clear the rubble, so if Emperor Aldares's body was buried under there, it would have dissolved into sacred power long before the castle was cleared away."

"Or maybe he escaped and went into hiding...," Asuna pointed out.

Kirito crossed his arms. "Hmm...I think Cruiga was able to hide in the villa because he had a minion body and didn't need to eat. But if Aldares is still alive, he'll require food. If he comes to buy food in person, he'll draw attention and get caught in Xiao's information network...but..."

"But what?"

"According to Fazel and Linel's investigation, there are a number of former Imperial Knights from the four empires' Imperial Guard who are unaccounted for. They swore loyalty to the imperial families, so I wouldn't expect them to switch over to the guardian army right away, of course..."

"But if those former knights had rejoined the emperor, it wouldn't be that hard for them to arrange for food. So in that sense, we might need to widen the search."

"It's like no amount of manpower is enough for us," Kirito grumbled.

Ronie knew he was dealing with so much work that it was pulling him all over the place every day. She straightened her back and said, "When we become proper knights, we will help you with whatever we can!"

Kirito flashed her a grin and said "I could use that," then looked at Tiese. His

eyes bulged with surprise.

Ronie looked to her right. Just a moment ago, Tiese had been listening seriously, but now she was crumpling her face, biting her lip, and doing everything she could not to cry.

“Tiese,” she said, reaching out to touch her friend’s back. In terms of size, Tiese was slightly larger than her, but now she felt as small as a little child.

Kirito and Asuna said nothing. They remained calm and composed, as the leaders of the knighthood should, but they waited and watched, considerate of her emotions.

“Kyrrr...”

Shimosaki had been playing tag with Tsukigake and Natsu in the middle of the grass, but now he approached the table with a little croon and licked at the fingers of her right hand. She scratched the little dragon’s head gently, then looked up at last.

“Um...Kirito, Lady Asuna...”

The two of them just nodded. Tiese sounded out each word carefully.

“I...I think I’m going to refuse the promotion to full-fledged knight.”

“Why do you say that?” asked Kirito earnestly. His black eyes were as powerful and warm and enveloping as they’d been since the first time they’d met at Swordcraft Academy, and they convinced Tiese to reveal what she’d been carrying inside of her all this time.

“...I suggested that we should investigate the emperor’s villa...because I heard a rumor there were ghosts there. And if ghosts are real...then maybe one day I can see Eugeo again. I let my emotions carry me onward, and I put Ronie and Tsukigake and Shimosaki in danger. I...I don’t have the right to be an Integrity Knight.”

Her voice trembled at the very end, and a single set of tears dripped from her maple-red eyes.

There were many things Ronie wanted to say to her friend, but right now it was Kirito’s job to accept Tiese’s emotions.

“You want to see him, don’t you?” he said, his voice gentle but ever so slightly strained. Tiese’s face shot upward; she stared at him with teary eyes.

“There are times when I want to see Eugeo so much, I can’t stand it,” he went on. “When I’m alone, I always find that I’m remembering something he said or the way he smiled. And...the truth is, it’s not like there’s no way to hear the voice of those who have died. Our memories seep into things we treasure and places we love, and it’s possible to summon a kind of imitation soul from them through sacred arts...”

This caused Tiese to twitch. She clasped her hands before her chest and wrung the words from her lungs. “Then...Then, can I see him? Can I see Eugeo again...?”

Kirito closed his eyes briefly. He shook his head in one slow motion. “Even if a sacred art could help you hear Eugeo’s voice, that would not be the real Eugeo. Emperor Cruiga came back to life as a minion, and he wasn’t the real person, either...Five floors above us on the top of the cathedral, Eugeo fought the pontifex, and they both died. Like the young Alice, whose soul was taken away from her by the Synthesis Ritual, his soul has gone on a journey to somewhere far, far away. Even after that point, the memory of Eugeo in his sword saved me many times...but that too burned itself out in the battle with Emperor Vecta...”

His words were full of sympathy and kindness but also cruel honesty. Tiese’s shoulders slumped.

“Then...I suppose his memories are nowhere to be found in this world...,” she murmured.

“I didn’t say that,” he insisted firmly. He lifted his hand, then pressed it to his chest. “The memories are in here. His memories still remain in all the people who met Eugeo and spent time with him. And if the Eugeo of your memories speaks to you...then that *is* the real Eugeo.”

Tiese inhaled sharply, almost like a gasp, and pressed a hand to her own chest.

A few seconds later, she let it fall to her lap.

“.....I was. I was...only Eugeo’s page for a little over a month. I didn’t get to

travel with him, like you did, or fight against the Axiom Church with him. And the truth is...I'm the reason he was taken to the Church in the first place. It was my fault he couldn't be at school and ended up going far away...and that's why I can't hear his voice!"

She pressed her hands to her face and began to cry. Shimosaki issued a note of concern and rubbed his neck against her legs. Tsukigake and Natsu stood by, watching.

"Tiese," said Asuna quietly as the girl continued to cry. "I lost someone I cared about very much in the real world, too. She was younger than me, but so, so much stronger, always cheerful and smiling. I thought of her like a little sister. The time we spent together was very short...but during the Otherworld War, she helped save me. She appears in so many of my memories. What's important isn't the length of time...and what Eugeo did was to save you two. I'm sure he never once regretted doing that."

Asuna reached out and gently caressed Tiese's back. The girl's sobs were growing quieter. But she didn't take her hands off her face, so Kirito faced her directly and said, "Tiese, even if you don't take the promotion to be a knight, you'll still trade your sword in, right?"

It was an abrupt question, but Tiese did remove her hands at last to reveal her tear-streaked face.

"Yes," she said. "Because I was still using a standard-issue sword at the mansion, Ronie had to do all the fighting..."

"Then you'll get to choose your everyday sword from the armory...and I also want you to keep this," Kirito said, pulling out the wrapped item he'd stuck in the nearby flower bed.

From the white cloth emerged an unspeakably beautiful longsword, as translucent and blue as ice, with a carving of a rose on its hilt. Tiese's eyes went as wide as they possibly could when she saw it.

"Th-the Blue Rose Sword...?!"

Kirito set down the sword—the divine weapon that once belonged to Eugeo and had been in Kirito's care ever since his death—on the table before her.

“B-but—but that’s your...”

She shook her head nervously. Ronie understood why she wouldn’t want to take it.

From the battle against the pontifex to the very conclusion of the Otherworld War, Kirito’s heart had remained closed to the world. He hadn’t been able to speak or walk, but he had never loosened his grip on the Night-Sky Blade and the Blue Rose Sword.

But Kirito just grinned and said firmly, “I want you to have this, Tiese. You don’t have the equipment-authority level yet, so swinging it around might be tough, but you can certainly keep it in good shape...If you polish it carefully, I’m sure you’ll be able to hear Eugeo’s voice, too. And that voice *isn’t* an imitation. Not the voice that comes from your own memories, rather than some art...Go on.”

At his urging, she hesitantly held out her hands and grabbed the sword in its white leather sheath. Tiese’s present equipment-authority level was 40, like Ronie’s. The priority level of the Blue Rose Sword was 45, if she remembered right. With a gap as big as five, it would be difficult to even lift it, unless you had a blacksmith’s or craftsman’s calling.

From the moment they entered Swordcraft Academy, Eugeo and Kirito were able to wield this divine weapon. In other words, their equipment authority was at 45, around the level of a higher Integrity Knight. So it made some sense that they were able to hold their own against Deusolbert and Fanatio in Central Cathedral. But like Kirito always said, the numbers weren’t everything when it came to strength.

Tiese stood up, widened her stance, and let out a long breath. She inhaled for just as long, tensed, and slowly, carefully lifted the Blue Rose Sword.

The divine weapon rose to her chest without resisting her grasp. She clutched it firmly, lifted the handle up to her cheek, and smiled, with just a trace of her tears still visible.

“Kirito, I will treasure this sword. I will perform upkeep on it every day and engage deeply in my training...and one day, I will be a great and mighty knight capable of swinging it!”

“Good.”

Kirito and Asuna nodded together. Ronie blinked and found that her eyes were filling with tears, too.

Her love for Eugeo. Renly’s proposal. Tiese would still need much time to reach her answers to these things. But she could take it bit by bit, one step at a time. Just the way the two always had.

A breeze blew through the garden, and the bells for the two o’clock hour chimed pleasantly.

“Ah...time to go,” Kirito said abruptly, shoving the last piece of the apple pie into his mouth. It was big enough that his cheeks bulged like Natsu the nut-loving rat.

“Where?” Asuna asked.

“Watch the front gate, everyone.”

They did as he said, moving down the passage—Tiese taking slower steps with the heavy weapon in her hands—to where they could look south, down to the front yard of the cathedral.

At that very moment, the gate was open, instead of closed like always, and a large carriage drawn by four horses was making its way onto the premises.

“Wow, that’s a huge carriage,” muttered Tiese.

“I wonder who’s riding in it...,” Ronie said.

“Oh, come on, don’t you remember the announcement at the meeting a few days ago?” Kirito asked with a grin. There was cream stuck to his face. “It’s the apprentice artificers who are entering the cathedral this month.”

“Wha.....?”

The two girls shared a look, then stared at the carriage again. They *had* mentioned this topic. The whole uproar with the black emperors had completely pushed it from their minds. But that meant this carriage was carrying...

“...Frenica!” they shouted together. The girls looked to Kirito and Asuna. “Um,

d-do you think we could...?”

“You want to go see her, right? I’ll deliver the Blue Rose Sword to your room later.”

“I...I’m so sorry for the trouble! Thank you very much!” Tiese said. She didn’t want to let go of the sword for even a moment, but she couldn’t run with the divine weapon yet. Ronie joined her in bowing to Kirito as he took the sword.

“Lady Asuna, thank you for the pie and tea! If you’ll excuse us!”

“Go on, now,” said Asuna, beaming and waving. They rushed past her toward the staircase.

But behind their backs, they heard Kirito say, “I’ll go down to greet Selka, too.” They looked over their shoulders and saw Kirito, Blue Rose Sword in hand, leap right over the railing into the open air.

“Oh! Hey, Kirito! Take me with you!” Asuna shouted, jumping after him. The swordsman delegate and subdelegate vanished in an instant. Ronie and Tiese looked at each other, then giggled.

“Tsukigake, Shimosaki, Natsu, we’re going!” they called out.

The juvenile dragons chirped, and the rat leaped onto Tsukigake’s back.

The five of them sped along energetically through the observation deck as flowers bloomed all around them in anticipation of spring.

(The End)

AFTERWORD

Thank you for reading *Sword Art Online 20: Moon Cradle*!

The subtitle here is the same as for Volume 19, but it's not a mistake or laziness on my part. Like Volumes 1 and 2 (*Aincrad*) and 3 and 4 (*Fairy Dance*), the title spans both books. The story of Moon Cradle ends here...for now. But the problem hasn't been completely resolved, has it? I've left behind a number of questions, like who the real mastermind is and what the red jewel is supposed to be. But the battle between Kirito and the black emperors is going to continue over another hundred years and eventually get to the battle with the Abyssal Horror (the spacebeast from the ending of Volume 18), so if I want to write the whole story out, who knows how many books that might take...At the very least, I wanted these two books to provide a bit of enlightenment for the feelings of Tiese and Ronie, but even that didn't get a full conclusion. I'm sure that, one day, Tiese will hear Eugeo's voice through the Blue Rose Sword, but...what about Ronie? She has a distant descendent in Laurannei, so we know she'll have children eventually, but it's hard to imagine her cutting off her feelings for Kirito and marrying someone else at this point in time. But now that she's about to be promoted to a proper knight, I'm sure that Ronie will get much, much stronger and find her own answer, not something that's been given to her by someone else.

The story of the Underworld will stop here, at Volume 20. In the next book, I'm planning to put us back in the real world, where Kirito and Asuna start a new story as high school students, not rulers of an entire country. I'm still envisioning some vague ideas as to what that story will be at this point, but I plan to bring it to you in the not too distant future. I hope you look forward to our new chapter. And I'll also rush to get you some more *Progressive* at last!

About two weeks from the release of this book, on September 27th, the Blu-ray and DVD of the theatrical movie will be on sale. I've heard that the visuals, which already looked so crisp and high quality in the theater, will even have a number of improved takes! I'm also writing a little short story epilogue of sorts to pack in with it, titled "Cordial Chords." You can enjoy it even if you haven't read the theatrical bonus, "Hopeful Chant" (though you'll enjoy it more if you did), so please check it out!

To my illustrator abec, who did double duty on that bonus material and this volume, thank you so much for the ever more beautiful and impactful illustrations. To Miki, who is so busy running a company and an editorial office that it's a mystery when he actually sleeps; and to my sub-editors, Tsuchiya and Adachi, thank you for all your help. And to all of my readers, I hope I see you again as *SAO* finally prepares to head into mysterious, uncharted territory!

Reki Kawahara—July 2017

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